



Center for Behavioral Health Studies

Culture Counts in Mental Health Services

Striking disparities in access, quality and availability of mental health services exist for racial and ethnic minority Americans, according to the Surgeon General's recently released report, *"Mental Health: Culture, Race and Ethnicity"*.

This report, a supplement to the 1999 first-ever Surgeon General's report on mental health, highlights the role culture and society plays in mental health, mental illness, and the types of mental health services people seek.

Accessing Quality Care

The study finds that, although effective, well-documented treatments for mental illnesses are available, racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to receive quality care than the general population.

Overall, just one in three Americans who need mental health services currently receives care. A critical consequence of this disparity is that racial and ethnic minority communities bear a disproportionately high burden of disability from untreated or inadequately treated mental health problems and mental illnesses.

"While mental disorders may touch all Americans either directly or indirectly, not everyone has equal access to treatment and services," said U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher. "The failure to address these inequities is being played out in human and economic terms across the nation — on our streets, in homeless shelters, public health institutions, prisons and jails."

Cultures Role

Culture, broadly defined as a common set of beliefs, norms and values, influences many aspects of mental illnesses. It

influences, for better or for worse, how our patients communicate and manifest their symptoms, how they cope, the range of their family and community support, and their willingness to seek treatment.

"A past history of racism, discrimination and economic impoverishment can deter minorities from using services and receiving appropriate care", states Dr. Satcher.

The cultures of clinicians and the service system itself may further influence diagnosis and treatment.

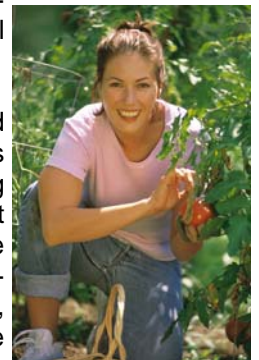
Provider Awareness

Providers need to know how to build upon the cultural strengths of the people in their care. After all, while not the sole determinants, cultural and social influences do play important roles in mental health service systems, especially when added to biological, psychological and environmental factors.

Dr. Satcher observed that mental illnesses are real, disabling conditions that affect all populations in the nation. He emphasized they are as, "treatable or more treatable than other illnesses like diabetes, cancer or heart disease".

A Fundamental Right

According to Dr. Satcher, **"Mental health is fundamental to a person's overall health, indispensable to personal well-being and instrumental to leading a balanced and productive life.**



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I want to be absolutely certain that my message is heard by America's minorities. The message is this: If you or a loved one is experiencing what you think might be symptoms of a mental disorder, seek treatment and seek it now."

Patients should insist on the kinds of services that can and should be available to them, whatever their language, income, geographic location, race or ethnicity.

The Surgeon General's report concludes by proposing broad courses of action including: continuing to build the science base, improving access to treatment, reducing barriers to, and improving the quality of, mental health services along with supporting culturally relevant capacity development.

—Excerpted from Surgeon General's Report, "*Culture Counts in Mental Health Services*", August, 2001

Editorial Staff

Editor in Chief:
David W. Cunningham

Assistant Editors:
Kay Seder
Hugh Kilbourne

Art/Graphics Designer:
Lenny Joyce



Center for
Addictions Studies

Rimrock Foundation
P.O. Box 30374
Billings, MT 59107

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