

## Multiculturalism

It is important to acknowledge that Australia has not been tolerant of ethnic or linguistic diversity in the past. Colonisation by European settlers saw the dispossession of the country's Indigenous people, initiating decades of discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In the 1800s, various colonial authorities passed laws to restrict Chinese immigration, later replaced by the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. From the 1950s to the 1970s, immigration policy gradually became less restrictive. In 2003, the government released *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* which outlines strategic plans and principles for a multicultural Australian community.

Modern Australia is home to people from many cultures. Since Europeans first settled in Australia people from all over the world have come to make Australia their home, including those from the Pacific Islands, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 23% of Australians were born overseas and that 14% were born in countries where English is not the first language.

In Australia today, people from multicultural backgrounds include migrants, people born in Australia that come from a non-English speaking background (NESB) or from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, refugees and indigenous Australians. These people represent diversity in religion, race, language and ethnicity.

## Issues affecting Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health problems can affect people of all ages, from all cultures and social groups. The prevalence of mental or behavioural problems among people born in Australia is similar to the rate for people born overseas. However, there are some particular issues that should be considered in regard to the mental health of immigrants, refugees and those from ethnic minority groups.

People from diverse cultural backgrounds have a range of protective and risk factors in regard to their mental health and wellbeing. A person's cultural background will affect how they interpret and respond to life experiences. Something that is characterised as a mental health problem by one person might be viewed as an experience of personal growth or spiritual significance by another. Cultural values and personal circumstances will also influence whether a person seeks support primarily from friends and family or from professional services.

Immigrants may experience stress due to culture shock - the need to adjust to a society with different social structures, values, expectations, political systems, beliefs and practices. They may face challenges organising housing, health care, schooling and other services for their families in an unfamiliar environment. They may not have access to support networks of friends, family or people from their own culture.

For some, language barriers can make these challenges more difficult. Even when interpreters are available, there may be difficulties with different dialects, or people may have access only to an interpreter of a different gender, or a different political or ethnic background. Fears about confidentiality may also arise when the interpreter belongs to one's own small or close-knit community.

Some immigrants to Australia experience unemployment or poverty. They may have limited job opportunities, due to language difficulties or skill levels, or because religious requirements limit the type of work they can do or the days they can work. Others may have qualifications from overseas that are not recognised in Australia. They may need to accept unskilled work or undertake further study to have their qualifications recognised.

These and other difficulties can lead to a sense of isolation and difficulty in building security and social networks. Immigrants who have been separated from family and friends in their own country may find themselves with little personal support. Difficulties communicating, limited finances and poor access to transport can leave people isolated in their own homes, with little connection to others and limited opportunity to improve their personal situation.

Living in a remote or rural area may increase the isolation felt by immigrants. In some areas of Australia, specific policies exist to encourage refugees and immigrants to settle outside of the capital cities. Linguistic and cultural barriers, difficulty accessing services in sparsely populated areas and separation from cultural networks can magnify the sense of isolation.

In some cultures, women mainly have contact with people from their own home and family. In the absence of extended family networks in this country, they may find themselves more isolated than their male counterparts. Others may feel that they are expected to work or interact outside the home more than they are used to, which can cause discomfort or conflict. Women may also have fewer English language skills than men, through differences in gender roles and access to education.

Many people who come to Australia are survivors of trauma such as war, natural disaster or torture. Survivors of trauma or torture are more likely to develop a mental illness, including depressive and anxiety disorders and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They may experience difficulty in concentrating, insomnia, nightmares, panic attacks, chronic pain, and feelings of powerlessness, aggression, depression or guilt.

Migrants may also experience 'long-distance suffering' through media reports of war or natural disasters. This occurs when people are exposed to the suffering of others in their homeland and may result in feelings of helplessness, anxiety and depression.

### **Mental Health Issues Facing Multicultural Youth**

Young people from different ethnic backgrounds, whether born in Australia or overseas, can experience particular difficulties in feeling caught between two sets of cultural standards and values. Parents may feel that adoption of Australian values and customs represents a loss of their traditional culture and may use a more strict discipline style to counterbalance perceived permissiveness in Australian society.

Life transitions that are part of young adult development can be more difficult to negotiate due to cultural views on sexuality, relationships, gender roles, education and employment. A Kids Help Line survey (2001) has revealed that feeling restricted in choice of friends, dating and socialising are prominent sources of family conflict identified by young people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Social isolation can be a problem for young people from non-English speaking backgrounds or ethnic minorities. Making and maintaining friendships can be difficult due to language and cultural differences and because of bullying. Difficulties in educational attainment can arise due

to interruptions in schooling, language difficulties and cultural barriers. This may lead to fewer employment opportunities and lower socio-economic status.

Depending on the situation of the individual, such life challenges can be associated with poorer outcomes for young people from diverse backgrounds. These could include increased risk of suicide, risk-taking behaviours, increased vulnerability to drug or alcohol problems, anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem. These can result in withdrawal or in aggressive and acting out behaviours.

### **Racism and Discrimination**

Another issue that may affect the mental health of many Australians is racism. Racism devalues an individual's identity and sense of self, lowering self-esteem and confidence. Racist behaviour may result in people withdrawing from contact with others, or being afraid of going to school or work. It may increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and substance use.

It is illegal to discriminate against a person on the basis of race or ethnicity, in terms of employment, access to goods and services, education or accommodation, as expressed in the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and the Racial Hatred Act 1995. It is unlawful to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate people on the basis of their culture or ethnicity. Racist behaviour includes:

- Refusing to associate with a person because of their racial or ethnic origin; this includes work, study and social interaction.
- Wearing badges, insignia or clothes with slogans against a particular cultural group.
- Writing or broadcasting negative material about particular cultural groups - this includes graffiti, slogans, pamphlets, books or the Internet.
- Making fun of the clothes, food, religion, speech or physical appearance of a person on the basis of race or ethnicity.
- Using derogatory language and reinforcing negative stereotypes about people from particular cultural groups, including telling jokes.
- Making judgements or assumptions about a person's abilities, values or preferences on the basis of their cultural background.
- Teasing or taunting people on the basis of their racial or ethnic origin, or behaviour that is part of their culture.
- Threatening or physically assaulting people because they belong to a particular cultural or ethnic group or practise a particular religion.

### **What Can Schools and Teachers Do?**

Caring relationships and connection with others, high but achievable expectations and opportunities for participation enhance resilience in young people. Schools can use these approaches to promote resilience among students from multicultural backgrounds:

- Give students opportunities to explore and share information about their own and other cultures. Encourage them to be proud of their own heritage and customs.
- Ensure high expectations and appropriate levels of support for those from different cultures. Be careful not to assume that a person from a particular culture or language background will not do well at school or that they will do well and need less support.

- Be aware that those from non-English speaking backgrounds may be at greater risk for mental health problems. Recognise that there are many factors that might contribute to this and be sensitive to the fact that many of these students may be dealing with personal problems, family conflict or racism.

Racism is a serious issue in many Australian schools. In a report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1991), many parents and students from ethnic communities reported verbal abuse and racial harassment in schools. In 1999, Kids Help Line reported that children from non-English speaking backgrounds were more likely to report bullying at school than those from English-speaking backgrounds.

Teachers and other school staff can help to counter racism in a number of ways:

- Be aware of your own rights and responsibilities in relation to racial discrimination; read your school's policies on diversity and bullying.
- Teach students about their rights and responsibilities in relation to racism and challenge racism whenever and wherever it occurs.
- Be a positive role model by displaying non-racist behaviour in the classroom, playground and staff room.
- Assess your own knowledge in relation to different cultures and be open to staff development and training opportunities to increase cross-cultural understanding.
- Recognise and value the cultural diversity that exists within your school and classroom.
- Create an inclusive learning environment where students from all backgrounds feel confident to participate in class.
- Encourage the involvement of parents and community members from all backgrounds in school activities and in feedback on school activities.

For more information about addressing racism visit: [www.racismnoway.com.au](http://www.racismnoway.com.au).

Each school and education system in Australia has its own policies and procedures to ensure that the curriculum is balanced in content and that people of all cultures feel safe and accepted. When you join a school, it will be helpful to do some research about how the school manages cultural diversity.

Here are some strategies to consider when you join a new school:

- Find out about the mixture of cultures represented in the community and in the school; if you're not familiar with these, learn a little about their history and culture - your local council and library can help.
- Locate and read your school's formal policies and procedures relating to cultural diversity; investigate the bullying policies as well, because bullying in a multicultural school may be linked with racism.
- Ask staff, including the school executive, what formal or informal links your school has with cultural groups in the community.
- Find out whether your school or region offers formal professional development opportunities in regard to cultural diversity; you might like to raise this at a staff meeting.
- Talk to other teachers in the school about what strategies they use in the classroom to ensure inclusive teaching; while you will have learnt about this at university or college, it is helpful to talk with someone who is already teaching in a multicultural community.

- Talk to other teachers about whether they have adapted their assessment styles, to ensure they do not disadvantage those students who have different cultural perspectives or those for whom English is not their first language.
- Talk to staff and students from a variety of backgrounds about whether they think racism is a problem in the school; if so, ask them what kind of behaviour is occurring and what the school is doing to address this.
- Observe students in the classroom and grounds to see if there are signs of racism; these might include students not mixing with those of different cultures, name-calling and taunts which are racist in nature, fights between groups which are culturally based.
- Find out about counsellors, youth groups and other sources of support in the community, including any which cater for young people from particular cultural groups.

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