

# Understanding the role of cultural stigma on seeking mental health services

*Mental health stigma may impact whether a person seeks mental health services and treatment, or their decision not to seek care at all.*

**Published:** August 4, 2020

**Last updated:** November 7, 2022

**Link:** <https://health.choc.org/understanding-the-role-of-cultural-stigma-on-seeking-mental-health-services/>

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[\(https://www.choc.org/providers/psychology/modir-sheila-ph-d/\)](https://www.choc.org/providers/psychology/modir-sheila-ph-d/), pediatric psychologist; Baleska Alfaro, licensed marriage and family therapist; and Dr. Ava Casados and Dr. Sarah Ruiz, post-doctoral fellows at CHOC

For some people, making an appointment with a mental health provider may be a personal and independent decision. For others, the decision to seek therapy services may be influenced by their culture or community, as each culture has its own understanding, interpretation and beliefs around mental health symptoms.

Our own culture also teaches us ways to cope with distress and whom to rely on for support during difficult times. This may impact whether a person seeks mental health services and treatment, or their decision not to seek care at all.

In many cultures, negative stigma about mental health symptoms or therapy services is a major obstacle to getting professional help. Research shows that people in racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S. are less likely than White people to seek outpatient therapy services. Many

ethnic minority groups are more comfortable going to their primary care physicians or family members for assistance with mental health symptoms as opposed to speaking with a mental health provider. We all want to be accepted by our communities, and sometimes fear of shame or embarrassment prevents people from seeking mental health treatment.

For instance, Black families may be understandably reluctant to seek mental health therapy due to the longstanding history of discrimination, racism and mistreatment the Black community has experienced at the hands of providers in the U.S. Instead, they tend to take an active approach in handling adversities independently and directly. They also tend to rely more on spiritual resources for emotional support. While these beliefs and approaches are valid, overly negative views of therapy can keep children who do need a higher level of care from getting that help.

Studies show that Latinx (a gender neutral reference to a person of Latin American cultural or ethnic identity in the U.S.) families are also less

likely to trust mental health providers compared to White families and are more likely to rely on social support from extended family and other community members. When Latinx individuals do tell others about their experiences with stress or emotional difficulties, they often focus on physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping or loss of appetite and are less likely to discuss the thoughts or feelings that are bothering them.

For Asian American and Middle Eastern American communities, cultural beliefs that seeking mental health treatment will bring shame and dishonor to the family leads some people to internalize their symptoms instead of seeking therapy. Many Asian American children have described feeling pressured to appear perfect and successful, and therefore keep their symptoms secret. For Middle Eastern American adolescents, research has found that they tend to seek support from other family and religious community members.

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These examples are broad, but they illustrate just a few of the reasons why ethnic minority children are much less likely to receive therapy when they need it. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the mental and medical health system to make services more accessible to under-served families, and to spark change to counteract myths about the stigma of mental health symptoms and mental health treatment. Parents can also play an important role in examining their family's own cultural beliefs about treatment and identifying ways to advocate for their children to get expert help whenever they need it.

## How our community can end mental health stigma

So, how do we, as parents, healthcare professionals and the community begin to work on eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health disorders and accessing mental health services? After all, one in five children experiences a mental health disorder.

Here are some tips that can help our children and families feel more comfortable with identifying, discussing, managing and accessing services for mental health.

### Seek reliable information

A first step that we can take to end mental health stigma is to seek out reliable and accurate information about mental health disorders, treatment options and resources in our community. Trusted sources can include, but are not limited to:

- [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(https://www.nami.org/findsupport\)](https://www.nami.org/findsupport)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(https://www.samhsa.gov/programs\)](https://www.samhsa.gov/programs)
- [Orange County Health Care Agency \(https://www.ochealthinfo.com/services/children-families/mental-health\)](https://www.ochealthinfo.com/services/children-families/mental-health)
- [CHOC mental health education and services \(https://www.choc.org/programs-services/mental-health/\)](https://www.choc.org/programs-services/mental-health/)

When speaking to children about mental health, use resources that are age-appropriate and engaging. A young child may find books helpful, while an older child may prefer to get information online. Look over resources with your child to help them find reputable sources of information and avoid popular social media platforms as your only source of information. Not sure how to start? Here are a few resources for kids:

- [OK2Talk.org \(https://ok2talk.org/\)](https://ok2talk.org/)

- [Sesame Street Communities](https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/) (<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/>)
- [CHOC's Let's Talk About It guides](https://www.choc.org/mental-health/lets-talk-about-it/) (<https://www.choc.org/mental-health/lets-talk-about-it/>) for starting conversations around mental health

### **Use appropriate language**

The resources listed above can help you understand how to talk to your children about mental health issues, as well as how to dispel mental health myths they might have heard about conditions and treatment. Using correct language can reduce any shame or guilt you or your family and friends may have about mental health and can create a space that makes it easier for children and teens to speak openly about their own struggles and seek help.

### **Celebrities normalizing mental health conditions**

Because so many people live with and manage symptoms related to a mental health condition, it isn't hard to find a celebrity or well-known public figure your child admires who has a mental health condition. We can use celebrity or public figure examples to help normalize mental health conditions and access to mental health treatment. Our children will be more open to discussing their mental health condition and to trying out mental health services if they know that their favorite singer, actor or athlete also lives with a mental health condition.

### **Learn to explain your child's mental health condition to your support system and community**

Once we have accurate information about our child's mental health condition and treatment plan, it could help to share this information. If we share information about mental health with our families, schools or places of worship, as well as other members of our support system, they can each

better understand the child's mental health and how they manage symptoms. Sharing information can also help increase empathy and support for the child's well-being.

### **Seek support in your community**

Children and teens with mental health conditions may not know anyone else with a similar diagnosis, which can impact their self-esteem. For teens especially, finding support from an online community may be a helpful way to openly speak about their mental health condition. Parents may also benefit from knowing other parents with children who have mental health conditions, as this can allow families to find a sense of community or support. Your local National Alliance on Mental Illness chapter offers [peer support groups](https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Support-Groups) (<https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Support-Groups>) for parents and individuals with mental health conditions.

### **Advocacy**

Engaging in advocacy is another way that parents and community members can help break down mental health stigma. Organizations like National Alliance on Mental Illness engage in advocacy and policy change using individual's stories. Advocacy can help raise awareness about important mental health issues and help dispel myths and break down stigma. It could also have positive impacts for those who are engaging in advocacy, helping to develop a sense of solidarity and common purpose.

For more health and wellness resources from the pediatric experts at CHOC, [sign up for the Kids Health newsletter](https://www.choc.org/about/sign-up-for-mailing-list/) (<https://www.choc.org/about/sign-up-for-mailing-list/>).

## Get mental health resources from CHOC pediatric experts

The mental health team at CHOC curated the following resources on mental health topics common to kids and teens, such as

depression, anxiety, suicide prevention and more.

**View the Mental Health Guides**  
(<https://health.choc.org/guide/mental-health/>)

✓ **The guidance on this page has been clinically reviewed by CHOC pediatric experts.**

**For more health and wellness resources from the pediatric experts at CHOC, sign up for the Kids Health newsletter.** (<https://www.choc.org/about/sign-up-for-mailing-list/>)

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**For more health information for your family visit [health.choc.org](https://health.choc.org)**

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