

Beyond the language barrier: supporting the behavioral health needs of refugees and immigrants

What if the patient sitting in your exam room has survived war, persecution, displacement, or years spent in a refugee camp, but has never been asked about it?

Refugees and immigrants often demonstrate incredible resilience, but many have experienced significant trauma, loss, family separation, cultural adjustment challenges and barriers to accessing healthcare. These experiences can contribute to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other behavioral health concerns that may go unrecognized in clinical settings.

Behavioral health needs are not always expressed the same way across cultures. Patients may describe physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbances or chronic pain rather than emotional distress. Cultural stigma surrounding mental health may also prevent patients from seeking help.

What providers can do

Creating a welcoming, culturally responsive environment can help build trust and improve outcomes.

- Use qualified interpreter services such as Language Line, when language assistance is needed.
- Screen for depression, anxiety, trauma and behavioral health concerns when clinically appropriate.
- Recognize that cultural beliefs may influence how patients understand and discuss mental health.
- Consider social determinants of health such as housing, employment, transportation, food security and social support.
- Engage patients and families in shared decision-making while respecting cultural values and preferences.

Why It matters

When behavioral health concerns go unidentified, patients may experience poorer health outcomes, increased emergency department utilization, lower treatment adherence and decreased quality of life. Early identification and culturally appropriate interventions can help improve engagement in care and support healthier outcomes.

As healthcare organizations continue advancing health equity initiatives, providers play a critical role in ensuring refugees and immigrants receive compassionate, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate behavioral healthcare.

Learn More

Providers interested in expanding their knowledge can access free educational resources through:

- Think Cultural Health – Cultural Competency Training for Health Care Professionals <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/education/behavioral-health>
- National CLAS Standards (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services) <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/clas/standards>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Refugee Behavioral Health Resources <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/helplines/national-helpline>
- CDC Immigrant and Refugee Health Resources <https://www.cdc.gov/immigrant-refugee-health/index.html>

Together, we can help ensure every patient feels heard, respected and supported—regardless of where their journey began.