

Suffering in Silence:

Mental Health and the AAPI Community

The AAPI community is in the midst of a mental health crisis.

Research from the American Psychiatric Association shows that 2.7 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) suffer from mental illness and or have a substance use disorder.

Additional studies show Asian Americans experience more psychological distress than the general population, yet are three times less likely than white people to get professional help for their mental health issues.

Asian Americans are also more likely to have their mental health symptoms manifest physically, leading to an incorrect diagnosis, lower rates of detection and lack of appropriate treatment. A separate study showed that while Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders report suffering from depression, alcohol use and anxiety, very few seek the help they need.



The Taboo of Mental Illness

The stigma of mental illness is a harsh reality in the AAPI community.

Suppose an AAPI individual discloses that they are mentally ill. In that case, the burden is on the individual, their family and community, says Gordon C. Nagayama Hall, Ph.D. emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. He says the stigma usually prevents people from getting the help they need.

“They’re not going to want to lose face by seeking mental health services,” he says. “That would be an admission of failure, especially for themselves and their family. Losing face involves the loss of reputation, not only for oneself but one’s whole family. It could also be a loss of face for their whole community.”

William Ming Liu, Ph.D. professor and chair in the Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education at the University of Maryland agrees.

“The way that we treat mental health is to go out and talk to a psychologist, psychiatrist or counselor,” he says. “There’s some resistance to that because it tends to bring the mental illness or the conflict into the public. Many Asian Americans feel like it should be handled within the home or the collective larger organized family unit.”



The “Model Minority” Myth

The model minority stereotype praises AAPI individuals as the ideal immigrant population because of their economic and educational achievements.

“People believe that Asian Americans don’t necessarily need mental health services because they believe they are the model minority and don’t represent or look like somebody in distress,” says Lui. “There’s the perception that Asian Americans are educationally doing well, they are economically doing well and they don’t complain about things like racism.”

Meanwhile, 42% of Asian Americans say their mental health has been impacted by racial discrimination, according to a [poll](#) conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of the educational campaign Girl Up.

At the height of anti-Asian violence and hate crimes, Marisa Hamamoto says she was triggered so badly that she couldn’t leave her home. Hamamoto, a stroke and multiple assault survivor, saw a therapist who diagnosed her with PTSD. This was the same time that People Magazine named her one of the Women Changing the World in 2021.

“I’m more forgiving of myself,” says Hamamoto, the owner of [Infinite Flow](#), a non-profit dance company that employs disabled and non-disabled artists with intersectional identities. “This is just a part of my disability and there’s nothing wrong with me. I was initially scared to get the diagnosis because I didn’t want to confront it. You would think as a disability advocate for years that I would be able to do that.”

Lack of Culturally Focused Treatment

Research has [pointed](#) to the need for culturally relevant mental health services and providers specifically for the AAPI population. AAPI communities are very diverse. The [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) says approximately 50 ethnic groups that speak over 100 languages make up the AAPI community, with ancestries connected to countries including China, Japan, Thailand, Samoa, Tahiti and Guam.

There are indications Asian Americans may be more likely to stay in treatment if it's tailored to them. But that's easier said than done.

"The challenge is to find people who are linguistically, culturally and ethnically similar," says Lui. "To be able to go out into those communities to help destigmatize mental health, but also present these community members with mental health options and services. Talk to them about what mental health and mental illness is and how we can treat it."

Hall says many AAPI individuals believe that available mental health services were designed for and by someone other than them.



"For many Asian Americans, they are concerned about school if they are a student, or their work, or their family," he says. "For immigrants, it's a matter of learning English and trying to acculturate. Those are practical concerns that are often not addressed in traditional types of mental health services."

Hall's research inspired him to create an online mental health app for the AAPI community. Users will have access to an Asian American therapist who will provide customized and relevant responses to their questions.

"The advantage of an app is that it is private and a person doesn't have to publicly admit to their problem, they can do it on their phone," he says.

Incorrect Diagnoses

Eva Yi Zheng felt that she never belonged.

Her parents were not affectionate. When Zheng wanted to play volleyball and piano, her father said she was too short and her fingers weren't long enough. As a Chinese American, there was also the pressure of succeeding in high school and college. During one of her many crying episodes, Zheng reached out to her father in distress. He made an appointment for her to see a pediatrician.

"The doctor took just five seconds to diagnose me," she says. "He just said I need to sleep more. He didn't ask about any other occurrences or any other times I felt depressed. He just sent me home after a five-minute visit."

Zheng says the cost of therapy is prohibitive and currently manages her anxiety with free mental health sessions offered by her employer.

Studies show that mental illness in Asian Americans is often misdiagnosed because of symptoms that present differently compared to other groups, language barriers and the medical community's lack of knowledge about Asian cultures. The AAPI community consists of approximately 50 ethnic groups that speak over 100 languages.

David, a Chinese American who asked that only his first name be used for this story, was diagnosed with asthma when he was young. The doctor prescribed him a nebulizer, an assistive breathing device. After 11 years, David found out he was suffering from depression and anxiety.

"It was a waste of money and time for my parents to go through something that was very much a solvable issue," he says. "I wasn't that I wasn't getting a diagnosis. It just wasn't getting the right diagnosis. You can't get help if you don't know what the help is actually for."

Fear of Treatment

Most young AAPI young adults do not seek professional help for their mental health problems and instead reach out to friends or lean on their religion. They fear disappointing their parents and are burdened with the pressure of family obligations.

“My young adult clients that come in and their parents don’t know – what will happen if they know?” says Jyothsna Bhat, Psy.D., clinical psychologist and South Asian mental health advocate at Bhat Psychological Services. “They may be disappointed in them, they may see them as a failure. They may see them as weak, this feeling of being defective.”

Bhat is South Asian and she admits that even she was reluctant to attend therapy — a requirement of her master’s degree in clinical and counseling psychology.

“Stepping in to talk to a therapist, even in the very beginning, was scary,” she says. “What would other people think if they knew I was doing this or how would this be perceived?”

Bhat’s advice for people seeking therapy is to take their time finding a mental health professional they trust. Ask people who have attended therapy about their experiences. If you don’t want to talk to a therapist alone, you can always bring someone with you.

AAPI Mental Health Resources

Over the past 50 years, the number of mental health resources and services supporting the AAPI population has grown.

The [Asian American Health Initiative](#), the [New York Coalition for Asian American Mental Health](#) and the Asian American Federation are among the organizations responding to the mental health needs of Asian Americans on a state level.

The [Asian Mental Health Collective](#), the [Asian Mental Health Project](#) and the [National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association](#) serve the AAPI community by providing mental health resources like seminars, support groups and the ability to search for therapists by ethnicity and language.

Riciel-Grace Crudo, a Filipino American, went to therapy in 2018 to work through feelings of being stuck in her career. Crudo says she was lucky to find an “amazing” Asian American female therapist.

“It’s so important to show that you are not alone in this journey and that other folks are looking for the same kind of resources and help,” she says.

Together with her friend Sabrina Wang, they founded the Power of Asian Feminine. The pair hosts webinars every quarter to support Asian American women, including one in 2021 on mental health.

“It’s not only empowering for me to continue doing this work for myself but it’s empowering for me to share this information and reach out to other folks in my community about how we can do this together,” she says.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES:

Why are AAPI individuals less likely to seek mental health help than other Americans?

How does the model minority myth affect the mental and emotional health of the AAPI population?

The rise in anti-Asian violence has contributed to Asian Americans’ poor mental status. What can be done to address the problems they face?

Why is it important to have culturally relevant mental health treatment options for AAPI individuals?

What mental health support does our company provide for AAPI people and other marginalized groups?