



nami

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Recovery for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Living with Mental Illness

When a person receives a mental health diagnosis, many questions about support and treatment begin to surface—questions such as, “Will I be okay?” “What will happen now?” or “Is there hope for me?” Asking these questions is part of a normal response to dealing with something unexpected and overwhelming.

A mental illness diagnosis can be hard to accept, particularly because the lack of knowledge about these illnesses creates high levels of stigma (prejudice) and misunderstanding. This is particularly the case in the Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, where high levels of stigma can make a stressful situation even worse. For this reason, it is crucial to learn the facts. Just like your heart or lungs can get sick, so can your brain. Mental illness is nobody’s fault. It is a medical condition that affects people from all walks of life, race/ethnicity, educational and economic backgrounds. You did not cause your illness. You and your family are not to blame.

Facts about Mental Illness

- Mental illness is not caused by weakness of character, poor upbringing or lack of faith.
- Mental illness is nobody’s fault. Just like our heart or lungs can get sick; so can our brain.
- Mental illness is treatable.

Getting appropriate information and education about diagnoses, causes, treatment options, resources and services can help alleviate the anxiety and uncertainty AAPI individuals and families face when dealing with mental health issues. For example, knowing that mental illness can happen to anyone and that it’s no one’s fault can help in shifting the focus from blame to treatment.

What Is Mental Illness?

According to the National Mental Health Institute, mental illness affects one out of four individuals in the U.S. every year. AAPIs are no exception. For example, the National Asian Women’s Health Organization reported that among women aged 15-24, Asian American girls have the highest suicide mortality rates of all racial/ethnic groups.

Mental illness is a medical condition that can cause changes in a person’s thinking, feeling, behavior and emotions. These changes interfere with a person’s daily functioning, his/her ability to work and the ability to have meaningful relationships. If left untreated, illnesses such as major depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia can make coping with the demands of everyday life very difficult.

Mental illness may cause one to act in ways in which one may not have acted before. This is not your fault. While it may cause embarrassment at first, these behaviors are the result of a very real illness.

Recovery Is Possible

While living with a mental health condition can be a very serious and overwhelming situation, recovery is possible. Many individuals who are affected by these issues achieve and sustain recovery, which allows them to have meaningful and successful lives.

Recovery can be described in a variety of ways. The Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration defines mental health recovery as a journey of healing and transformation, enabling a person with a mental health problem to live a meaningful life in a community of his or her choice while striving to achieve his or her full potential. Others define recovery as a unique, personal and lifelong journey.

Recovery is dynamic and complex. It is a personal experience of moving through and beyond the limitations of one's illness. Recovery is about improving the quality of life and discovering a sense of meaning and purpose to living. There are many pathways to recovery and it does not look the same for everyone.

What Does Recovery Look Like from an AAPI Perspective?

Because recovery is a personal experience, it is challenging to identify the ingredients of the recovery process for everyone. Many individuals living with mental illness agree that for a successful recovery the following should be present in an individual's journey.

- **Hope.** Having hope is the foundation of recovery. It is the belief that life can get better and change can happen. Without hope, situations will not get better. For AAPIs, this could mean small steps in recognizing that anyone, regardless of race, income or education level, can have a mental disorder.
- **Support and inclusion.** Being surrounded by people you trust and who care about you is critical to recovery. These people can include family members, friends, co-workers or others. Supportive people are very important because they provide someone to hear your thoughts, a shoulder to cry on, can cheer you up when you are feeling tired, upset or sick and can help you recognize warning signs of a potential relapse.

For AAPI communities, family support is often crucial for a successful recovery due to the importance of family. However, because of the stigma of mental illness in AAPI communities, some families do not respond as positively and as supportive to a sick loved one. In this case, reaching out to others, such as groups of individuals living with mental illness, can help provide much-needed support. For example, you can attend, free of charge, a NAMI Connection (www.nami.org/connection) support group, a weekly recovery support group for people living with mental illness where people learn from each others' experiences, share coping strategies and offer each other encouragement and understanding.

Recovery for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Living with Mental Illness

- **Education and knowledge.** Having the information and the knowledge about one's illness and the available resources about one's recovery are also important. In addition, knowledge about one's own strengths, limitations and triggers helps allows individuals to set boundaries in a particularly challenging situation that could result them to relapse. Knowing where to look culturally appropriate services is crucial for AAPI communities, especially because of the influence of culture on help-seeking behaviors. While there are limited resources specifically on mental health and AAPIs, a few national organizations such as NAMI (www.nami.org/AAPI), the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA, www.naapimha.org) and the National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse (NAPAFASA, www.napafasa.org), as well as other local organizations, can provide valuable resources to help understand and navigate the process of seeking services and achieving recovery.
- **Coping strategies.** The ability to deal with constant challenges and manage stress is a normal part of life. A person in recovery is not immune to these stressors and situations. Managing stress as well as maintaining a balanced life, which includes eating healthy, getting enough rest, sleep and exercise, is significant to one's recovery. For many AAPIs, their spiritual beliefs and practices (e.g. meditation, religious affiliation, yoga) provide a source of balance and help create some harmony in their lives. A more holistic approach, which looks at both the importance of the mind and body, to recovery seems to fit more appropriately with the lives of many AAPIs who live with mental illness.
- **Strengths-based.** Focusing on the strengths rather than the difficulties in your life is a critical aspect of recovery. Instead of always paying attention to your illness, focus on the other aspects of your life. Celebrate your successes, even if they are small.
- **Self-determination and advocacy.** Self-determination and advocacy go hand in hand, since they both capture the ability of an individual to influence, define and have control over the decisions she/he makes about treatment options that may affect her/his recovery. In many AAPI communities, these rights are often shared and held by family members or elders. Therefore, make sure you talk to your treatment provider about the role you want you family to play in your treatment process. For example, is there an elder in the family or community that has to be part of this decision? Make your provider aware of issues such as this.

Also, knowing about your rights when you're receiving treatment can make a significant difference. You have rights to help you access resources and navigate the system effectively. For example, free language access services (e.g. interpretation, translation and materials in other languages) should be available to those whose primary language is not English. By federal law, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq43e4.html>) organizations receiving federal funding are required to make interpretation and translation services available to anyone that may need them. If they do not offer them voluntarily, make sure to ask for these services. For more information about language access, go to the Office of Civil Rights (www.hhs.gov/ocr/) or check with your local state health department to see what rights you have as a patient/client.

Recovery for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Living with Mental Illness

NAMI Hearts & Minds program has information on culturally competent care and self advocacy at

www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Hearts_and_Minds/Medical_Self_Advocacy/Culturally_Compentent_Care.htm.

Recovery is an ongoing process. It is a personal journey that incorporates many components of one's life. Physical, mental, spiritual and emotional aspects are all important to keep healthy. Successful recovery means paying attention to all these aspects evenly. But recovery is not a one-person act; it takes many people to help an individual maintain his or her recovery. Consistent and loving support from family members, friends and other community members plays just as an important role as a good relationship with your doctor.

With hope, resiliency and support from others, many AAPI individuals living with mental illness can recover, be successful and have meaningful lives.