



# Effects Immigration has on Mental Health and Challenges for People with Disabilities

## Overview

One in seven United States residents are immigrants.<sup>1</sup> People choose to leave their home country for many different reasons and in some cases, it is not a voluntary decision. An immigrant is a person who chooses to leave their home country with the intention of settling in a new country. A refugee is someone who leaves their home country due to fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. It can be difficult to move to a new country for any reason. Many people move to another country for better opportunities, such as for employment or education. Also, some people may move in hopes of accessing better services for a family member with disabilities. Migration involves more than adapting to a new geographical location. For some, moving to a new country can mean less family support and a new language. Migration also includes adapting to a new culture and finding one's place in an unfamiliar system.<sup>8</sup> These significant life changes for immigrants leads to an increased risk for mental health concerns.

## Mental Health: Stressors and Considerations

Research has shown that migrating to a new country can be a risk factor for developing mental health concerns.<sup>5, 8</sup> Some commonly seen mental health concerns in people who have immigrated to the United States are depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>4</sup> Migration is a process with stressors occurring at every stage. Poverty and political oppression

are stressors that may occur before migration.<sup>5</sup> Some traumatic experiences that can occur during or after migrating are family separation, being exposed to or experiencing physical violence, and sexual violence.

There are also specific stressors and experiences that can affect the mental health of immigrants such as:

- Needing to hide one's status or their family's status
- Being hypervigilant about surroundings
- Feeling a loss of identity
- Experiencing changes in self-esteem and perceived self-worth<sup>6</sup>

These stressors may be compounded by other challenges associated with migrating to a new country. Immigrants with disabilities are not always highlighted in conversations about immigration or disability. By examining what information is available, one can consider what additional stressors could affect the mental health of immigrants with disabilities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is twice as high than for people without disabilities. Difficulty finding employment significantly affects mental health and having good employment opportunities are a factor in improving mental health outcomes for immigrants.<sup>2, 8</sup> Also, children with developmental disabilities are at a greater risk of developing mental health problems. These mental health problems were found to negatively affect their post-school outcomes and amount of community involvement.<sup>3</sup> Since finding one's place in a new system is part of the migration process,

community involvement can be especially helpful in an individual's transition.

In addition to good employment opportunities, having family members in the new country can improve mental health outcomes. Mental health outcomes can also be improved if an individual is accessing public services, such as health care, that are better than in their country of origin. Although migration is a risk factor for mental health concerns, it can also lead to improvements in well-being as not everyone's situation is the same. Some important considerations are the reason for migrating, levels of formal and informal supports, and the amount of preparation made.<sup>8</sup> Despite increased risks for mental health concerns, many immigrants show high levels of motivation and resiliency.<sup>2</sup>

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### *Real World Connection*

In [Blanca's digital storytelling episode](#), she shared how a traumatic experience was a contributing factor for moving to the United States. This experience affected her mental health along with the stress of trying to get services for her daughter with a disability. Blanca said because of her status she could not travel to some distant locations which offered services she was interested in for her daughter's disability. Immigration concerns can discourage some people from accessing and applying for health services. Blanca was able to leave her unsafe situation when she moved to the United States. For some individuals, immigration concerns can keep them from looking for help and leaving unsafe situations, such as cases of domestic violence.

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## Supporting Families

Parents who migrated to United States have described how a multifaceted approach is necessary to meet the needs of immigrant

children with disabilities and their families. In their MHDD digital storytelling narratives, caregivers have listed the following as ways for improving support: expanding access to healthcare, more engagement with immigrant communities for better distribution of information and resources and increasing cultural competency. Caregivers also emphasized the importance of formal and informal support networks.

## Additional Resources

A person's immigration status affects what federal programs and resources they are eligible for. Although many individuals who receive Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance benefits are U.S. citizens, there are requirements that some non-citizens may be able to meet to qualify for these benefits. For information on these requirements as of 2020, you can visit this [Social Security webpage](#). It is important to remember that decisions and changes in government can lead to revisions in policies and regulations. As a result, making sure you are looking at current information is vital.

Making use of other resources can help you manage your health, however, it is not always easy to find resources. 211 is a confidential nationwide service that helps connect individuals to resources, including recent immigrants. You can visit [211's website](#) or simply dial 2-1-1 for their hotline. Both their hotline and website are available in several languages.

For helpful information, you can also visit this [online resource library](#) with resources made with a focus on immigrants. Here you can learn more about topics such as mental health, accessing healthcare, and finding a legal provider. You can also view this [resource library in Spanish](#).

Another useful resource is the [coping skills worksheet](#) from Therapist Aid. It explains coping

skills such as deep breathing and muscle relaxation that you can use when feeling stressed or anxious. You can also find the [coping skills worksheet in Spanish](#).

For some, guided meditations can help them cope with stress too. By visiting this website from the University of California Los Angeles you can find [guided meditations in English and Spanish](#).

## Contributors

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