



# Considerations for Improving Services for Asian Americans with Disabilities and Mental Health Concerns

*Note: We would like to note that the Asian community and Asian culture is incredibly diverse. Please keep in mind that this fact sheet is taking a general approach. We want to remind readers that the Asian community is made up of many different subgroups (Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and more). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind how experiences can vary among groups and individuals. Our hope is that being aware of some more common experiences can help providers more readily understand what supports a family or individual may need.*

## Introduction

The Asian American population makes up about 7% of the United States population and has been consistently increasing for many years. By 2060, it is expected to increase to four times its current size.<sup>1</sup> As the population of a culturally and linguistically diverse people increases, so does the need for culturally and linguistically responsive services.

It is believed that Asian Americans' use of mental health care services would increase if services were more culturally competent. This improvement is needed because Asian Americans access mental health services at a significantly low rate.<sup>5, 12</sup> To help put this into perspective, consider the following. In 2020, when the pandemic was declared, 1 in 2 Non-Hispanic White adults with “a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder” received mental health services. However, only 1 in 5 Asian American adults did.<sup>9</sup>

There are many reasons why more people are not accessing services, and it is not the same reason for everyone. For example, a provider might incorrectly

think a person's disability is the cause of their mental health symptoms. When this happens, people with disabilities can be turned away and/or told to get services for their disability instead. Overall, it is more difficult for people with disabilities to find mental health providers. When a person has fewer options, they may feel like they have to accept less effective services, or simply choose not to use services. This can especially be true when someone has a disability and has trouble finding providers who effectively take into account their culture. Asian Americans often experience the struggle of finding culturally competent service in both mental health and disability services.

In this fact sheet, you will learn about:

- perceptions around mental health and disabilities
- recommendations for improving services
- resources and how you can keep learning more

## Perceptions Around Mental Health and Disabilities

In [Maria's digital storytelling episode](#), she shares her experience as a first-generation Filipina immigrant and mother to a son with autism. In her experience, she feels she has to explain autism more and be more patient with her Filipino community. According to Maria, “that learning does not come easily, coming from a Filipino culture.” Although people in the Philippines are aware of autism, there are preconceived notions surrounding it, she says.<sup>7</sup> When there are fewer resources about disabilities, it is harder for people to develop a deeper

understanding of a disability. For some Asian Americans, like Maria, this can affect their interactions with their family. For example, it can mean explaining your child's disability many times and considering how to accommodate your child when going to large family gatherings.

Stigma can develop when people have less access to information, or a topic is not openly talked about in the community much. For example, an Asian community that does not talk about mental health openly can be more likely to have stigma. Also, stigma can occur more easily when symptoms seem to go against cultural values. For example, some Asian Americans have said their family's culture emphasizes being strong.<sup>7, 11</sup> A part of this perception in their opinion was that "silence is a sign of strength." Someone with mental health struggles who wants to talk about their struggles could be seen as weak. One individual said the expectation that comes with this value is to "move forward regardless of how you're feeling or risk being perceived as someone who easily accepts failure."<sup>11</sup>

It can be difficult for some individuals to consider mental health services when they believe their family would judge them, especially if family acceptance is highly prioritized. Many Asian Americans do not end up receiving mental health services. It has been theorized that cultural differences in the perception of mental illness contributes to Asian Americans' lower perceived need for treatment.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, if someone comes from a home where they feel they cannot talk about their feelings, it may be harder for them to do so in therapy. Being uncomfortable with talking about your problems with others can affect people in other ways too. For example, discomfort with sharing problems has affected Asian American parents' participation in programs. This discomfort was one of the most common barriers for participation in a parenting program shown to reduce the onset and worsening of children's mental health struggles. Another common barrier was the concern of being stigmatized by others who judge their parenting skills.<sup>6</sup> However, this is one study. Families' willingness to participate in programs and use services varies. For example, another study

found that second-generation Asian Americans were slightly more likely to use mental health services, while third and later generations were significantly more likely to.<sup>10</sup> For some parents, supporting mental health can feel like a new concept. Furthermore, they may not prioritize mental health as highly if they already feel overwhelmed by "visible disabilities." Many parents feel guilt and blame themselves when their child has a disability. Having to consider another factor or diagnosis, like a mental health diagnosis, can further dishearten parents.

Also, a family's past experience and other factors can affect their level of trust in others. A national Asian-American survey found that Filipino Americans reported being far less trusting of other people than other Asian subgroups.<sup>8</sup> These concerns and perceptions can affect both mental health and disability services because they affect interactions between families and service providers.

## Recommendations for Improving Services

Asian American individuals with lived experience have said there is a need to explain disabilities and mental health in the context of an individual's culture.<sup>7, 11</sup> Service providers should try to understand how families view the disability and/or mental health concerns without judgment. Since it can be difficult to talk about this, one suggestion is to ask the family or individual if there is someone they would like to bring to the appointment.<sup>7</sup> Having a person there they are close with can help them to feel more comfortable and possibly share more. This can be especially important because Asian American youth and parents can be shy and hesitant to ask questions.<sup>2, 7</sup>

Providers can also collaborate with families in ways that support their values. An Asian American family may value having strong family connections with immediate and extended family.<sup>3</sup> Providers can see if families want to include other family members in treatment activities and can incorporate activities they already do. Some Asian American families who value family connection have a strong sense of duty.

At times, a family might not want to use services because they feel it is their responsibility to take care of their family.<sup>4</sup> A related recommendation from Asian American parents is using parent testimonials to promote services.<sup>6</sup>

Families that are willing to use services, however, may not know what is available. Providers should remember that many people are not familiar with systems in the United States. Also, if a family is not English-proficient then it can be especially difficult to find out about services. Many times when agencies or organizations have resources in other languages, it is in Spanish. Therefore, it is recommended to connect families with other resources when possible. A mother shared that she would have loved to hear her provider say, “This is going to be a long journey. What supports will you need to sustain you through this long journey?’ (...) Because sometimes in the middle of that, that’s barely asked.”<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, since Asian American families are underrepresented in disability services, it is worth considering if your outreach methods can be improved.<sup>4</sup> Recommended places to do outreach through are schools, pediatricians’ offices, and churches.<sup>6,7</sup>

## Resources and How You Can Learn More

If you are interested in learning more, you can visit the recommended resources highlighted in this fact sheet. However, another great way to learn is by listening to those who are living the experience themselves. This can include digital storytelling episodes, podcasts, and more.

One way to hear stories is by visiting the [Disability Visibility Project website](#). Alice Wong is the founder and director of The Disability Visibility Project, which is described as “an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture.” Their podcast features episodes on a wide array of disability topics. One noteworthy episode is on [Asian American Women and Mental Health](#).

A great resource for providers, individuals, and parents is the [2022 Asian Americans with Disabilities Resource Guide](#). In this guide you can find testimonials, a collection of disability and mental health resources, and links to research articles on “the intersection of disability and Asian American identity.”

Lastly, for individuals interested in therapy who would like to find an Asian therapist there are online resources available. To name a few, there is [Psychology Today’s Find an Asian Therapist tool](#) and the [South Asian Therapists’ Directory](#).

## Contributors

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