



INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS

AND MENTAL HEALTH
GUIDE



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FOREWORD

The **Intercultural Relations and Mental Health Guide**, published by the Canadian Mental Health Association – Montreal Branch, is a reference, support and prevention tool designed for professionals working with immigrants. This guide suggests reference points to help you understand the difficulties linked to immigration and to distinguish these difficulties from those associated with psychological distress and other, more severe mental disorders. In this context, the guide provides concrete ways to improve your interventions to help the individuals you meet every day.

However, IN NO CASE does this guide replace advice from a recognized mental health professional (doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or other professional).

Because you feel strongly about the well-being of individuals and families that you come across in your work, do not hesitate to talk to a professional if you are dealing with very complex situations or when you are in doubt.

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INTRODUCTION

Immigration has always been a key factor in Quebec's development. In addition to contributing to the renewal of the active population, it also assists economic growth and enriches the social and cultural landscape of the province. Over the past few decades, waves of immigration have transformed Quebec's social fabric; new immigrants no longer come only from Europe but also from Central and South America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

While these changes have helped transform Quebec into a modern and dynamic state, they have also raised significant challenges, in particular that of encouraging individuals and groups to come together around culture, language or religion. These changes

can be mutually enriching but can also occasionally cause individuals to be misunderstood, rejected or excluded based on their differences from others.

The role of mental health professionals in the community means that a professional must not only adapt to changes in the social fabric but also understand the needs of new immigrants to help them adapt and integrate. To accomplish this task, a professional works with immigrants by building on their strengths and resources. A multiethnic reality means that requests for help are growing, are more diverse and require interventions for which our usual markers must be constantly adjusted to cultural differences to assure the welfare of each individual.



Role of Mental Health Promotion and Prevention Professionals



According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, mental health is “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity”¹.

A comprehensive approach to human beings based on the trust, potential and multiple resources of individuals necessitates both promotion, to increase personal and collective well-being, and prevention, to reduce the incidence of mental health problems. As such, you can play a significant role. Here are some suggestions that can be helpful:

IDENTIFY AND FOCUS ON PROTECTIVE FACTORS

They contribute to reducing the magnitude of risks and favour the emergence of models of successful adaptation and competency. Protective factors are catalysts that can bolster individuals' strength so they can come to terms with difficulties encountered in their environments and increase their resistance. A list of protective and vulnerability factors linked to immigration can be found on page 22 of this guide.

INFORM AND EDUCATE

Use educational activities or presentations to inform immigrants about healthy lifestyle habits; raise their awareness of mental health problems and of associated prejudices.

¹ GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES CANADA) (2006). *The Human Face of Mental Health and Mental Illness in Canada*, p. 2.



PROMOTE AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Your role as a support person for new immigrants helps them understand the system in which you work and helps them reconcile their values with those of the host country. Never take it for granted that a person knows the distinctive features and specificities of our organizations. You are in a unique position to help them discover the various services available in their environments (e.g. health care and social services, educational, community, municipal and governmental services).

DEVELOP COLLABORATION

Make a list of resources designed for cultural communities—community organizations, government institutions, resources in the neighbourhood or at school, self-help groups (some are presented in the *Resources* section of the guide). You can identify potential individuals with whom to work or, if needed, develop common projects with professionals from these resources.

ENLIST THE HELP OF NATURAL CAREGIVER NETWORKS

Family, friends, neighbours, families abroad, resource persons from neighbourhood organizations or spiritual guides make up a natural self-help network to which you can turn if necessary.

CLARIFY YOUR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Not every country has social workers or other professionals of this type. Therefore in some situations, you might have to define what a psychologist or social worker is and does. Explain clearly who you are and what you can do to help the person. Defining the notion of confidentiality clearly also develops the trust needed for any intervention. If you ask the person what he or she expects of you, your role will become clearer, as will your limits and those of your organization.





Importance of Training in Cross-cultural Contexts²

To respond appropriately to requirements for practising in a cross-cultural setting, you would do well to consider specialized training. Far from providing recipes or ready-made solutions, such training should encourage reflection that will evolve based on the backgrounds of individuals with whom you will work.

By participating in various training sessions, you will develop your knowledge, attitudes (interpersonal skills) and cross-cultural skills (know-how). You will also find a space to discuss difficulties encountered during your interventions.

Knowledge

Acquiring general knowledge about immigration will make you more sensitive to the realities experienced by new immigrants. You can familiarize yourself with the history of immigration in Quebec and Canada, the laws and policies governing them, inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, immigration statuses and categories, stages of adaptation and integration processes, the specific situations of refugees, social issues, and other topics. In short, you will better understand the societal issues linked to diversity.



LEGAULT, G. (2007). "Formation à une pratique interculturelle", *Équilibre*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Canadian Mental Health Association – Montreal Branch, p. 45-52

Interpersonal skills

To interact with people from various cultural backgrounds, it is important that you develop your interpersonal skills. These skills help you become aware of your values and your own culture, thereby shedding light on how cultural aspects influence your relationships with others. Using simulations likely to result in communication problems and values-based conflict (commonly called “culture shock”), training courses can help you become aware how some people’s beliefs and values may differ from your own in various spheres of life (e.g. family and social roles, children’s education, religious beliefs, ideas about physical and mental health); training can also provide opportunities to practice interventions while respecting these differences.

To find out
more about resources
that offer cross-cultural training
and diversity management,
see the section

***Resources – Training,
Research and Publications***

on page 87.

Know-how

Developing know-how ensures that you can adapt intervention approaches to different contexts. Sometimes you have to adjust your methods and disregard the non-directive approach usually proposed in helping processes. For example, new immigrants may find it difficult to express emotions in a language other than their mother tongue or to grasp the meaning of some expressions. A person’s expectations could also differ from your own perceptions. For these reasons, systematic and structural approaches seem to be particularly compatible with a cross-cultural approach since they take into account the various socioeconomic and political networks and structures affecting the person.