

The AMSSA Info Sheet series has been created to inform and support settlement service providers and key stakeholders across British Columbia. The Info Sheets cover a wide range of topics and highlight important facts and trends from across Canada and BC. Our goal is to assist organizations in navigating the rapidly changing landscape of the BC settlement sector.*

Migrant Mental Health

Good mental and physical health is a key outcome of successful settlement and integration. While the mental health of immigrants and refugees can be influenced by similar factors as Canadian born individuals, migrants often experience additional social and economic barriers.¹ This Info Sheet will examine some of these common barriers, and provide resources for support.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Services

For many immigrants, the early years after resettlement are a difficult period. Resettlement stresses such as underemployment, adapting to a new culture (acculturation), and family separation/social isolation can lead to significant mental health challenges.²

New immigrants can experience significant barriers to accessing mental health services. Often, new immigrants may not be familiar with the concept of “mental health” services. This can be due to a lack of mental healthcare services in their countries of origin, linguistic barriers, a fear of stigma for accessing services, or a lack of culturally appropriate services in Canada.³ Similarly, although mental illnesses have similar symptoms across cultures, their manifestations and how people describe and interpret symptoms vary with ethnicity and culture.⁴

Other barriers to accessing mental health services can include:⁵

- Fear of speaking English
- Suspicion of authority
- Isolation and sense of being an outsider
- Reliance on children to find accurate information
- Lack of familiarity with Canadian information sources
- Absence of knowledge of how to ask for services.

Healthcare providers also have structural and cultural barriers that can prevent immigrants from fully using their services.

These mental healthcare providers must have the appropriate social and cultural context to effectively reach new immigrants and refugees.⁶ For example, many times, the first need of a client is often not “medical” in nature, but the need to improve trust, comfort and communication between them and the service provider.⁷

Research into best practices suggests that Western models of mental health promotion should be supplemented by culturally-specific programs.⁸ One critical element to the success of mental health services this is the understanding that immigrants and refugees are not a homogenous group. Service delivery models must consider a number of factors, including the client’s age, gender, cultural identity, and immigration status.⁹

Refugees Face Added Challenges

The experiences of refugees prior to their arrival in Canada can have a lasting impact on their mental health status after migration. Many adult and youth refugees have experienced or witnessed war, torture, violence, targeted persecution, forced labour, forced migration and family separation.¹⁰

Studies on refugee mental health have found a strong correlation between traumatic pre-migration experiences and instances of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to one study of Tamil refugees living in Canada, 12% suffered from PTSD, compared with a general population prevalence rate of 1%.¹¹

Refugees experience the same barriers as many new immigrants, however often in acute and unique ways. For example, while non-refugee newcomers may also face linguistic barriers, refugees often arrive to Canada with limited education, lower literacy and low English fluency.¹²

Understanding the Language

Mental Health is a state of well-being in which a person realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.¹³

Trauma is the feeling of overwhelming fear or distress. Trauma is often unexpected, and many people say that they felt powerless to stop or change the event. Traumatic events may include crimes, natural disasters, accidents, war or conflict, or other threats to life.¹⁴

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder characterized by reliving a psychologically traumatic situation, long after any physical danger involved has passed, often through flashbacks and nightmares.¹⁵

Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. Someone experiencing depression is grappling with feelings of severe despair over an extended period of time. Almost every aspect of their life can be affected, including their emotions, physical health, relationships and work.¹⁶

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2, 8, 9. Khalou, N. et. all. ‘Migrant Mental Health in Canada’, August 2010. Available at: <http://ow.ly/J8MVF>.

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10, 11, 12. Wilson, R. M. et all. ‘Pre-Migration and Post-migration Determinants of Mental Health for Newly Arrived Refugees in Toronto’ Available at: <http://ow.ly/J8OEEd>.

13. World Health Organization, ‘Mental health: a state of well-being’, August 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/J8PxQ>.

14, 15, 16. Canadian Mental Health Association. ‘Understanding Mental Illness’, 2012. Available at: <http://ow.ly/J8Q5R>.

General Resources					
Program	Description	Eligibility	Languages	Region	More Information
HealthLink BC 8-1-1	24-hour health information, advice and referral phone line.	None	Over 130 languages	B.C.	www.healthlinkbc.ca 8-1-1
Cross Cultural Clinic (Vancouver General Hospital)	Provides a full psychiatric assessment including diagnosis, medication, recommendations, and referrals with other resources available in the community.	Referral required. Referrals accepted from social workers, mental health teams, and school counsellors.	Over 12 languages	Metro Vancouver	www.psychiatry.vch.ca/ccs.htm 604-875-4115

Crisis / Support Lines					
Program	Description	Eligibility	Languages	Region	More Information
Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre Mental Health Support Line	24-hour support and crisis counselling. The 310 Mental Health Support line uses routing technology to direct calls to the nearest network crisis line partner.	None	Interpretation services available	B.C.	www.crisislines.bc.ca 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433) 310 Mental Health Support: 310-6789
Interior Crisis Line Network	24-hour support to individuals experiencing emotional or situational distress, relationship issues, and social isolation.	None	English	Interior Region	www.kcr.ca 1-888-353-CARE (2273)
Vancouver Island Crisis Line	24-hour emotional support, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention services.	None	English	Vancouver Island, Gulf Islands, Powell River	www.vicrisis.ca 1-888-494-3888
Northern B.C. Crisis Line	24-hour counselling services for youth in suicidal crisis, provides support and education for families.	None	English	Northern B.C.	www.northernbccrisissuicide.ca 1-888-562-1214
S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Chinese Help Lines	Support for those experiencing difficulties accessing social services due to language or cultural barriers, or fear of social stigma.	None	Cantonese Mandarin	B.C.	www.successbc.ca Cantonese: 604-270-8233 Mandarin: 604-270-8222

Specialized Resources					
Program	Description	Eligibility	Languages	Region	More Information
Vulnerable Immigrant Populations Program (VIPP) Moving Ahead Program (MAP)	Case-managed program designed to meet the needs of especially vulnerable clients. VIPP helps clients to access mainstream services, primarily through outreach and in-home consultations.	In addition to CIC eligibility requirements, clients must also meet VIPP specific requirements. Clients must experience multiple and complex barriers to settlement and integration.	Over 40 languages	Metro Vancouver + Victoria	VIPP Alliance members: Abbotsford Community Services DIVERSEcity ISS of BC MOSAIC S.U.C.C.E.S.S. VIRCS (Victoria)
Bridge Clinic	Primary care to refugees from arrival until they are connected with a family physician in their community.	Health care screening and treatment for refugees and refugee claimants with, or without, legal status.	Interpretation services available	Metro Vancouver	Full listing of available resources: www.refugeehealth.ca 604-872-2511
Red Cross First Contact	Provides refugee claimants with access to emergency assistance, information and referrals.	Refugee Claimants	Over 50 languages	Metro Vancouver	www.redcross.ca 604-709-6656
Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST)	Provides individual and group trauma-focused counselling for refugee claimants.	Survivors of torture, refugee claimants, or anyone who arrived in Canada as a refugee.	Over 10 languages	Metro Vancouver	www.vast-vancouver.ca 604-299-3539 ext. 221

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<http://www.amssa.org/resources/Infosheet>

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