

Results of the Iranian Community Forum and Needs Assessment Administered in March 2007

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Executive summary

Background

At a community information forum held at the North York Civic Centre on March 4, 2007, members of the Iranian-Canadian community gathered to discuss mental health promotion and stigma of mental illness with experts in the field. The forum was a joint venture of the Iranian Canadian Social Service Providers Network (ICSSPN) and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

An estimated 225 audience members were invited to complete a needs assessment questionnaire focusing on mental health issues and service needs of the Iranian community—115 responded to the survey, which asked a series of questions about mental health and illness: from general questions to issues specific to the Iranian-Canadian community, disclosure, community approaches and other areas. Feedback forms were also distributed—145 responded to these forms, which asked about the event itself, the information presented, next steps and future topics and general comments.

Key findings

Based on the results of surveys conducted at this information forum, members of the Iranian community identified many challenges in accessing services for mental health problems; most of these challenges are in the areas of:

- language barriers and lack of culturally appropriate services
- lack of knowledge about the mental health system and ways to access the system
- the stigma of disclosing a mental health problem.

Respondents also identified topics of interest for future forums or other information initiatives; these topics include:

- general and in-depth information on mental health problems and treatment
- information on parenting and youth issues
- immigration and the challenges of adjusting to life in Canada.

Respondents suggested that Iranian-Canadians might work together to look

at ways to:

- make more services available to the Iranian community (their top priority)
- establish support groups for people affected by mental health problems
- involve community leaders in securing more services.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of these questionnaires, the CAMH and ICSSPN project team concluded with a series of recommendations, to:

- deliver additional educational forums or seminars, on specific mental health topics, to members of the Iranian community
- use the Iranian-Canadian media regularly to offer information on mental health issues to members of the Iranian community
- partner with Community Resource Connections of Toronto (CRCT) to provide a resource for members of the Iranian community, explaining how the mental health treatment system works and how to access necessary services
- explore opportunities for CAMH to partner with an appropriate community agency to provide a family/parenting program to members of the Iranian community.

Introduction

Mental illness affects people of all ages and in all walks of life. In Ontario, an estimated one in five people will experience a mental health difficulty sometime in their life; four out of five will be affected indirectly by mental illness, through the experience of a friend, family member or a colleague.

There are many beliefs about why people have mental health problems. Scientific studies suggest that mental health problems are associated with many different factors, such as:

- disturbances in the brain
- life events that challenge our emotional and physical well-being
- a history of mental health problems in the family
- being a victim of violence, abuse or other trauma
- and/or experiencing a lack of support or acceptance regarding your differences.

At a community information forum held at the North York Civic Centre on March 4, 2007, members of the Iranian-Canadian community gathered to learn about mental health promotion and stigma of mental illness from experts in the field. Members of the audience had a chance to contribute their views on mental health by completing a needs assessment. The forum was a joint venture of the Iranian Canadian Social Service Providers Network (ICSSPN) and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), a partnership that has completed several other initiatives.

This report will:

- discuss the feedback from the forum and the results of the needs assessment
- recommend next steps in addressing mental health concerns in the Iranian-Canadian community.

Project background

Over the past three years, different CAMH departments (Regional Services; Community Support and Research Unit; and Culture, Community and Health Studies) have collaborated with the Iranian community to increase

understanding of addiction and mental health concerns and develop ways of improving access to services for such concerns. Carried out through the CAMH Stigma Research Project, this collaboration included several initiatives:

- In 2005, CAMH staff presented two all-day workshops on the fundamentals of mental health and addiction to Iranian service providers working in various community settings.
- Another part of the project looked at the feasibility of developing a culturally appropriate resource for service providers, on stigma and mental illness. The CAMH manual, *Beyond the Label*, and the experience of the Korean community in adapting this resource, were explored as possible starting points for the Iranian community.
- Most recently, the project held a community information forum, *Maintaining Good Mental Health and Responding to Problems*, a partnership with the Iranian Canadian Social Service Providers Network (ICSSPN). A panel of health professionals from the Iranian community spoke on factors that may contribute to mental health problems, strategies for maintaining good mental health and coping with stress, early signs of problems, and mental health resources available in the community. Attendees completed a needs assessment survey to identify areas of high priority.

This report will discuss in detail the outcomes of the forum and the needs assessment, and will offer recommendations for further action.

Project process and strategies

In 2006, the CAMH Stigma Research Project developed a work plan that focused on increasing awareness, knowledge and understanding of mental health concerns and the stigma associated with mental illness. They chose several strategies:

- a literature review on mental health and stigma in the Iranian community
- consultation with the Iranian community to identify priority topics for a community forum
- development and delivery of a forum for the general public
- follow up to the forum, which included exploring future project opportunities with CAMH, such as the development of a culturally appropriate resource for service providers on mental health and stigma.

A member of the Iranian community was hired in January 2007 to carry out the project tasks. This consultant spoke Farsi, had a background in health education and worked with the project team and ICSSPN to plan and deliver educational activities for the Iranian community. The consultant carried out a number of tasks from the work plan to ensure the planned activities of the project were in keeping with the needs of the community.

Literature review

The first task the consultant conducted was a review of current literature on mental health issues and the stigma experienced in the Iranian community, including past needs assessments and reports. The review revealed a gap in the literature on this topic in particular, but found a considerable amount of information that discussed:

- the stresses many ethno-cultural groups experience when emigrating to a new country
- mental health concerns that arise in relation to settlement issues
- the challenge of getting help for mental health problems because of the shame associated with talking openly about mental health concerns and the lack of knowledge concerning available recourses.

The themes, challenges and approaches discussed in the general literature were noted and used to inform the next steps in the project, particularly the development of a community information forum and a needs assessment to further identify the specific needs of Iranian-Canadians in relation to mental health and addiction concerns.

Consultation with the Iranian community

Next, members of ICSSPN were consulted to determine areas of need and priorities that could be addressed through a community information forum. ICSSPN members gave input on what would be the best:

- date and location of the forum
- potential speakers
- content to cover
- promotion of the forum
- tools for measuring the impact of the event

Development and delivery of the forum

Selecting speakers

The community identified the importance of selecting speakers who were qualified mental health professionals, Farsi-speaking and trusted members of the community.

Determining content

The content of the speakers' presentation was carefully thought out, to ensure the forum's messages matched the stage of readiness of the audience. The approach to the forum incorporated the discomfort many members of the community have in talking openly about mental health problems. Language was carefully selected; speakers used terms such as "stress" rather than "mental illness" and talked about ways of resolving problems and maintaining good health. The forum also gave an explanation of the mental health system, so that audience members could better understand the way resources are organized and the process they must follow to access services. One speaker also focused her talk on the impact of mental illness in the family to share personal experiences and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

Promoting the event

The forum was promoted in many different ways. One of the key ways was to create a culturally appropriate flyer, which was mailed to community members and posted in Iranian shopping centres, residential buildings and public schools, where members of the community would have an opportunity to view it. The flyer was also stuffed into a number of community newspapers and magazines that members of the Iranian-Canadian community regularly pick up and read.

The community-events sections of newspapers catering to the Iranian community were also used to advertise the forum.

Information about the forum was shared with Iranian-specific associations: the Iranian Association in Ontario, and the Iranian student associations at the University of Toronto, York University and Ryerson University.

Iranian Radio (Seday-e-Iran) and Iranian TV (Shahr-e-Ma) made several announcements about the forum. Shahr-e-Ma TV also broadcast an interview with one of the panel's speakers to encourage attendance at the forum.

Members of the Iranian Canadian Social Service Provider Network helped

considerably with promotion. All members were given flyers to share in their agencies and post on public-information bulletin boards, and were also encouraged to tell clients about the event.

The Iranian community not only helped with pre-forum activities, but also helped considerably on the day of the forum. The forum was moderated by and ICSSPN member and the project consultant. In addition, volunteers from the community helped set up both the space where refreshments were being served, volunteers helped with translation and preparation of resource materials in Farsi as well as helped with the set up of the resource table where materials on substance use and mental health in Farsi were available to attendees to pick up. During the needs assessment survey, volunteers distributed the tools, responded to questions and oversaw the return of the completed tools.

Results of needs assessment survey

An estimated 225 people attended the Community Information Forum held on March 4, 2007. Just over half of the people there responded to the needs assessment survey (115 responses). To see a complete list of questions and responses, please see Appendix 1: Needs Assessment Data.

The needs assessment asked a series of 18 questions about:

- general opinions toward mental health and illness
- mental health issues and challenges specific to the Iranian community
- disclosing and seeking help for mental health problems
- community approaches to mental health
- other issues of concern to members of the Iranian community.

General opinions toward mental health and illness

Participants were first asked “What does mental health mean to you?” Their specific answers ranged widely, but the majority fell into the areas of:

- outlook: a life that includes love, enjoyment, satisfaction, a healthy attitude, being positive and hopeful
- ability to cope with challenges: accepting problems and realities, being able to cope with stress, having balance in one’s life
- having control over one’s own life: being able to make decisions, having goals and plans
- playing an active role in society: having an influence, fitting in, being adjusted to your society, being functional in your society
- having rights and freedoms.

When participants were asked, “What does mental illness mean to you?,” some responses were the opposite of the previous question (e.g., negative thoughts, being unable to cope with everyday stressors, lack of balance, loss of control, not being adjusted to society). However, most responses described particular:

- causes of mental illness: high stress, overwhelming problems, social pressure

- symptoms of mental illness: unreasonable reactions, lack of motivation, loss of self-esteem, loss of concentration, uncontrolled or abnormal behaviour, sadness, inability to differentiate between reality and imagination
- results of mental illness: hurting others, breaking the law.

Participants were also asked whether they thought some people are more vulnerable to having mental health problems. Most (83%) answered “yes;” the rest either did not respond (14%) or answered “no.” Those who answered “yes” were then asked to identify any groups that are vulnerable. The groups most often identified were:

- youth (62%)
- women (52%)
- seniors (43%)
- children (37%).

Other groups identified were men (9%), newcomers (5%), people with disabilities (4%) and homosexuals (3%).

Mental health issues and challenges specific to the Iranian community

When asked what they considered to be the main mental health issues and challenges in the Iranian community, the participants again gave a wide variety of responses. The majority fell under the general theme of immigration and cultural issues, and the stress associated with adjusting to a new country. Responses included:

- conflict between Iranian values and Canadian values
- general cultural and social adjustment, including homesickness and language barriers
- systemic immigration issues, such as problems with immigration status, lack of support, lack of acknowledgment by the Canadian government, lack of Iranian-specific counselling centres.

Other responses included:

- financial and employment problems

- family problems, such as marital conflict and parent-child conflict
- stigma related to mental health problems, such as shame and embarrassment about mental illness, and not acknowledging mental health problems
- personal issues, such as problems with confidence, self-esteem, loneliness, hopelessness, addiction, role confusion
- lack of access to/information about treatment, mental health, youth needs
- social issues, including violence among youth and lack of cohesion in the Iranian community.

These are also related to immigration. For example, many people arriving in Canada will have a change in their employment circumstances, ranging from not finding work in their chosen field (their credentials and work experience are not recognized here), to finding employment at a lower pay and status, to not finding work at all. Disappointment and loss of self-esteem can result. Newcomers to Canada may be unfamiliar with the health-care system, and so cannot access services they need in a timely way, which can lead to additional problems

Participants were then given a list of specific factors that may contribute to mental health problems among members of the Iranian community. They were and asked to check off all that they thought applied.

- Financial problems were most prominent: 82% of responses identified “unemployment and underemployment,” while 70% also identified “financial problems.”
- Immigration and cultural issues were commonly identified: language barriers (67%), adjusting to Canadian culture (60%), worry about family or friends left behind (60%), cultural barriers (58%) and racism and discrimination (42%).
- Family conflict was another major factor, with a response from 56% of participants.

Other factors noted included lack of access to specialized services, lack of a united Iranian community, ignorance or non-acceptance of sexual freedom among youth and homosexuality, addiction, the generation gap, and personal isolation.

Disclosing and seeking help for mental health problems

The next series of questions asked about disclosing and seeking help for mental health problems, as well as participants' personal experiences with mental health services.

Opinions on getting help for mental health problems

Participants were asked, "What are some things that you, a friend or a family member would find helpful in alleviating mental health problems?," and were able to choose any from a list of factors. The majority of participants identified:

- reduction in the cultural and language barriers that limit access to education, employment, housing, health care, and support for problems (62%)
- community education (57%)
- mental health services that are culturally appropriate (57%)
- information on services for mental health problems (56%).

Other factors identified were availability of Iranian association/institution/professionals, educating people about immigration/being in a new society, educating Iranian health professionals to help adjust with new workplaces, parental understanding, religious belief and a united community.

When asked, "What is the right time to seek help when you are experiencing a mental health problem?," the majority (62%) identified the need to seek help "right away—as soon as a person begins to feel differently." Other times included "when there is a crisis" (22%) and "when the problem becomes unmanageable" (16%).

Participants identified a wide range of places they, a friend or a family member could turn to for help with a mental health problem:

- mental health professional (63%)
- family doctor (47%)
- information sources such as books, newspapers, magazines, and Internet (34%)

- family or friends (30%)
- trusted community member (29%)
- community agency (24%).

Some respondents also identified seeking support from friends who have experienced similar problems and through spiritual practices.

Disclosing a mental health problem

When asked, "If you, a friend or a family member had a mental health problem, would you feel comfortable disclosing it to anyone?," most participants (57%) answered "yes"—34% answered "no," and 9% did not respond.

Participants were then asked, "What are some of the issues that inhibit you, a friend or family member from sharing concerns about mental health problems?," and given a list of factors to check off. The most commonly identified factors were:

- fear about being judged by members of my community (59%)
- concern for my job, education or personal life if it is known that I or my family member has a mental health problem (59%)
- I do not want to be seen by anyone in the community as needing help (18%)
- mental health problems are confidential and should be kept in the family (13%).

Other factors that were identified were fear of losing child custody, fear of labeling, lack of trust about service providers' confidentiality and lack of knowledge about mental health professionals.

Experiences of accessing mental health services

Participants were asked about experiences they have had (or their family and friends have had) with accessing mental health services.

Nearly half (44%) had previously tried to access services—39% had not, and 17% did not respond. Of those who had tried to access services, 46% identified the experience as "good," while 13% identified it as "bad or with little effect."

Many additional comments were offered, such as:

- medication concerns (only taking medicines , being prescribed medication that was past its expiry date, having many unpleasant side-effects from a prescribed medication)
- systemic problems (long waiting lists, costly, difficulties with legal regulation in hospitals, lack of information/guidance available from family physicians and pharmacist)
- personal concerns (painful to accept that you have a mental illness that requires treatment, quitting treatment prematurely because of the difficulty in coming to terms with being unwell and not wanting the label of being mentally ill).

When given a list of places to receive mental health services and asked to choose which options they preferred, participants responded as follows:

- 48% identified "an Iranian service provider."
- 32% identified "family doctor."
- 25% identified "a mainstream service provider."
- 20% identified "hospital."
- 14% identified "family or friends."

Other options identified included: an Iranian psychiatrist, books, a reliable expert and "someone who really loves his job and is empathic."

Participants were then asked what sources of help they made use of, outside of available formal medical services for mental health problems. Self-directed help was most common, with 63% identifying "information I obtain from books, magazines, newspapers, internet, etc.," followed by "stress management strategies like meditation, exercise and nutrition," which was identified by 49%. The next common sources were community agencies (39%), friends and family (25%) and services associated with a neighbourhood school or community centre (20%). Other sources included prayer, police and counselling.

When asked, "What barriers do you, a friend or a family member experience when trying to access services for mental health problems?," the most common responses ranged from lack of information and long waiting lists to language and cultural issues, and practical concerns:

- lack of information about available services for mental health problems

(53%, consistent with a previous question that asked what they would find helpful in alleviating mental health problems, in which 56% replied “information on services for mental health problems”)

- hard to get an appointment; waiting lists are long (48%)
- language barriers (48%)
- limited services available in Farsi (43%)
- cultural barriers (34%)
- transportation (20%).

Other barriers that were identified were similar in kind to comments about experiences with mental health services:

- systemic problems of Canadian mental health services, including cost
- ignorance/no attention to preventive factors
- lack of trust toward service providers/fear of disclosure of information
- service provider prescribing medication that was past its “best-before date”
- lack of availability of an Iranian psychiatrist and services in Farsi.

Community solutions to mental health issues

Another group of questions asked about community approaches to mental health, such as public information. Participants were first asked a general question about the best way to provide information about mental health problems to the community, again, choosing all that applied from a list of options. Among the most common choices, three information sources were specific to language/culture:

- “workshops/seminars” (67%)
- “television program in our mother tongue” (62%)
- “pamphlet or newspaper in our mother tongue” (53%)
- “deliver health messages through community agencies” (50%)
- “deliver health messages through cultural programs” (47%)
- “internet” (33%)

- “posters” (26%)
- “over the phone” (24%).

Other responses included:

- having an organization to take care of families and to educate them about mental health
- providing services through cultural and social organizations
- direct contact
- services in hospitals in Farsi
- small group sessions including people having common problems.

When asked about ways to make it more acceptable to talk about mental health problems in the Iranian community, the most common choices involved education and communication:

- having ongoing communication in the media (newspaper, radio, TV, magazines) (61%)
- starting early by educating children and youth in schools about mental health problems (53%)
- sharing people’s personal stories of living with a mental illness (45%).
During the forum, a member of the audience with chronic bipolar mood disorder shared his experience and commented that it was important to include a first-hand client perspective in educational activities on mental illness. Such perspectives can be valuable in breaking down the stigma and promoting greater understanding and discussion of the attitudes we may hold about people living with mental illness.

Other responses included having a close relationship between parents and children who are following Iranian cultures, finding a community-appropriate method, and talking more about mental health problems.

Looking at ways in which members of the Iranian community could address mental health problems among members of their community, participants were again given a list of options and asked what the Iranian community could do together.

- 51% identified “establish a work group who will investigate ways of having more services made available for members of the Iranian

community.”

- 50% identified “establish support groups for individuals and family members affected by mental health problems.”
- 45% identified “involve community leaders and stakeholders in the process of securing more services for community members.”
- 43% identified “lobby for more services.”

Other options identified included having information forums/seminars and inviting people with mental illness to speak at them, helping each other, giving priority to people with mental health problems, reporting crimes to the police and establishing a group home for the members of the Iranian community living with mental illness. This latter remark was also made during the discussion portion of the forum by a member of the audience who, in addition to advocating for establishing a group home for Iranian-Canadians, talked about the need for community members to work together to make more services available that are free from barriers of language and culture.

Finally, participants were asked what areas they would like to learn more about. The most common areas identified included:

- what to do about mental health concerns (59%)
- stress (56%)
- parenting (51%)
- adjusting to life in Canada (43%)
- alcohol and drug problems (24%).

Other items that were identified included mental health and addiction problems in youth, depression, autism, dealing with people who have mental illness, and relationships with daughters aged 18–24.

Wanting to learn more about parenting and mental health concerns among youth was a theme that emerged in several places. For example, when respondents were asked in the needs assessment to identify the main mental health issues and challenges in the Iranian community, responses included:

- “youth problems”
- generation gap and parental conflict with young children”

- "lack of understanding of youth needs"
- "violence among youth"
- "lack of knowledge about parenting."

In addition, in the feedback collected about the forum, respondents suggested "parenting skills" and "how to cope with youth problems" as future topics for seminars. When asked what next steps CAMH might undertake, one respondent mentioned "conduct an information forum on parenting skills."

Other issues not included in the survey

At the end of the feedback form, participants were given the opportunity to list any other issues that were not included. They identified:

- the need for more seminars, and more time for question-and-answer in future seminars
- the need to inform the community about the questionnaire results
- a shortage of health/social service professionals and services, culturally appropriate to the Iranian community and available in Farsi, that can respond to the needs of Iranian-Canadians experiencing mental health difficulties. While there is a shortage of appropriate services overall, there is a particular shortage of services for Iranian-Canadian youth.
- a request to help the Iranian community develop ways of bridging the gap between Iranian and Canadian cultures, such as cultural differences and expectations, especially in dealing with children and youth being raised in Canada.

Results of feedback forms

Of the estimated 225 people who attended the Community Information Forum held on March 4, 2007, over half (145) responded to the feedback forms. These forms asked questions about:

- the event itself
- the information presented in the event
- next steps and future topics
- general suggestions and comments.

To see a complete list of questions and responses, please see Appendix 2: Feedback Data.

The event itself

When asked, "How did you hear about the event?," the most common response was participants responded as follows:

- Iranian magazines (46%)
- TV (13%)
- friends (13%)
- a service provider (10%)
- a flyer (10%)
- radio (8%).

When asked to describe themselves, nearly half (48%) identified as "someone interested in mental health topics"; nearly a third (29%) identified as a "family member or friend of someone experiencing problems." The remaining were service providers (15%), people with experience in the mental health or addiction treatment systems (5%) and "other," such as a journalist or teacher (3%).

For nearly three-quarters of the participants (74%), the event met their expectations. The remainder either did not complete this question or were dissatisfied. When asked what was missing, their responses tended toward wanting more specific/detailed information, information about youth problems, solutions for problems, in-depth coverage of the topics, and more

time given to the forum. Additional responses suggested wanting a psychiatrist among the speakers and having a movie about mental health.

Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the forum on a scale of 1 to 5, where "1" is the least satisfied and "5" is the most satisfied. As with the previous question measuring expectations, most were satisfied (80% rated the forum between 3 and 5, or "satisfied" to "most satisfied"); only a small percentage (1%) were "least satisfied," and approximately 11% did not complete this question at all.

The information presented in the event

Similar responses were seen when participants were asked about their satisfaction with the information, rather than the event. Nearly three-quarters (71%) received the information they had hoped for, 20% did not, and 9% did not respond. Those participants who did not receive the information they had hoped for commented that they had wanted information on practical strategies, depression, addiction and parenting skills.

When asked, "Did you learn anything new?," 79% of participants answered "yes," 13% answered "no," and 8% did not respond. Those who answered yes, when asked what they had learned, gave the following responses:

- information about CAMH
- definitions of mental health, psychological terms, signs of having a mental health problem, and the effects of mental illness on the family
- ways to seek effective help, including learning that antidepressant drugs are not always the best solution, and finding social services providers and psychologists in Toronto
- that many people have mental health problems
- mental illness and stigma/negative attitudes
- stress—general information and learning that it is not always pathological
- ways to improve personal and social behaviours, cope better with problems and have hope for a better life
- immigration and mental illness, socialization to Canada, the need for a support group for the Iranian community
- the need to work for mental health promotion, and to transfer

information to others.

Participants answered that they would use the information gained in the forum:

- to help others: to encourage people to get help for problems, to share information with others, to help families they are working with, to work better with clients
- to help themselves: to solve/get help for their own problems, to have a broader view and be more relaxed and compassionate toward people with mental illness, to have a better attitude toward personal barriers and difficulties, to communicate better with family and to cope better with a family member who has a mental illness.

Next steps and future topics

Finally, participants were asked for their suggestions about future initiatives. When asked about what next steps CAMH should take, most responses were of two types:

- suggestions to conduct similar seminars, conferences, and specific information sessions/forums/workshops on parenting skills, addiction/12 steps and practical strategies, and to support the Iranian community to conduct such seminars themselves
- suggestions specifically relating to the Iranian community, such as: to listen, understand and take Iranian community needs seriously; to help the Iranian community access services; to help establish Iranian mental health centres (in general and for families); to help the Iranian community help Iranian immigrants in the area of mental health; to support establishing a group home for Iranians; to help the Iranian community get funding for research into mental health; and to follow up by making the results of these two surveys available to community members.

Other responses were more general suggestions, such as:

- to provide information about available services in mental health
- to provide more psychiatrists/psychologists covered by OHIP, and to facilitate access to treatment
- to establish some speech therapy centers

- to make mental treatment mandatory
- to focus on primary prevention.

Suggestions for future topics included:

- more detailed, practical seminars; small groups including people who share the same mental health concerns, such as depression
- addiction: in general, in youth, and help for affected family members
- mental health: practical strategies, solutions for problems and prevention of problems
- parenting skills and youth problems
- coping with stress
- immigrant problems: new circumstances, risk factors
- self-awareness and getting control over one's health
- speech therapy

General suggestions and comments

Finally, participants were invited to offer any other suggestions or comments. Responses included:

Suggestions

- to help establish a community group: to follow up the needs assessment done in this forum, to help support Iranian people having mental health problems
- to establish a support group in the Iranian community
- to address the needs expressed in this forum
- to provide more treatment for Iranians: to have more Iranian psychiatrists, to give a facility to an Iranian mental health professional to help Iranian patients
- to continue seminars, more in-depth with more specific items, such as informational forums for men about cultural differences and issues between Canada and Iran
- to keep in touch about upcoming events by e-mail

Comments

Attendees at the forum expressed their appreciation for the forum on the evaluation forms as well as in person. Comments such as “as the first step, it was very nice and more than our expectations,” were common.

As well, attendees reinforced many of the points made earlier in the forum feedback and needs assessment processes, such as:

- the need to have culturally specific services for Iranian-Canadians experiencing mental health difficulties (establish a support group, increase the number of Iranian service providers in the health and social service system)
- to hold additional information events that are more in-depth and on specific topics
- to share the results of the needs assessment process with the community
- to foster the development of a working group that could respond to the issues presented in the forum and the needs assessment questionnaire.

Summary

Challenges faced by the Iranian-Canadian community

Based on the results of surveys conducted at this information forum, members of the Iranian community face many challenges in accessing services for mental health problems.

Language and culturally appropriate services

Language and lack of culturally appropriate services were the most commonly cited barriers to getting help for problems. Having treatment services available in Farsi, the official language spoken in Iran, would allow members of the community to talk to their service provider in their mother tongue and not have to struggle with the discomfort of being understood in English. Having services in Farsi would also facilitate culturally appropriate treatment that attends to the norms and values of Iranians who have newly arrived in Canada. Respondents told us that working with a Farsi service provider would increase their trust and their willingness to talk about their problems.

Knowledge about the mental health system

The difficulty in finding the right kind of help also has to do with knowledge about the mental health system. Respondents who completed the needs assessment and forum evaluations reported that people go untreated often because they do not have a good understanding about the different kinds of services available for mental health problems, and the way to access these services.

Disclosing a problem

Like many people, Iranian-Canadians have a degree of discomfort in talking about mental health problems. Respondents noted a concern that disclosing a mental health problem (either of their own or of a family member) could have consequences for their job, education or personal life. Many respondents shared the idea that members of the community might judge a person if they knew the person had a mental health problem.

Topics of interest to the Iranian-Canadian community

Members of the Iranian-Canadian community are interested in learning more about mental health issues, and seminars and workshops are their preferred ways of receiving this information. They are also open to receiving

information through television and radio programs, as well as through newspaper articles and pamphlets. Of critical importance is that the information be provided to them in Farsi.

General and in-depth information on mental health problems and treatment

A large majority of respondents reported wanting information on mental health problems and ways to manage problems. Related to this point is an interest in having seminars that provide more in-depth information on specific topics such as depression.

Information on parenting and youth issues

Next in priority was a strong interest in receiving information on parenting and youth issues. There is particular interest among community members to enhance their skills as parents, and to respond to the needs of youth (and others) affected by mental health and addiction concerns.

Immigration and cultural issues

Immigration and the challenges of adjusting to life in Canada—and bridging the social and cultural differences between Iran and Canada—were also of importance to a large number of respondents.

Strategies for change

When it came to identifying strategies for change that Iranian-Canadians might participate in, respondents noted the following (ranked in order of number of responses):

- establishing a work group to investigate ways of making more services available to the Iranian community (their top priority)
- working together to establish support groups for individuals and families affected by mental health problems
- involving community leaders in the process of securing more services for community members.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the needs assessment and the feedback collected from attendees about the forum, we offer the following recommendations for CAMH and ICSSPN to act on as next steps:

1. Plan and deliver additional educational forums or seminars, on specific mental health topics, to members of the Iranian community. Areas of interest include: parenting, youth substance use and mental health concerns, depression, stress and other mental health concerns.
2. Use the Iranian-Canadian media regularly to offer information on mental health issues to members of the Iranian community. Suggested strategies include articles in the print media and interviews on television and radio.
3. Provide a resource for members of the Iranian community, explaining how the mental health treatment system works and how to access necessary services. The project team will pursue discussions with Community Resource Connections of Toronto concerning translating *Navigating Mental Health Service in Toronto: A Guide for Newcomer Communities* into Farsi, and developing a dissemination strategy and associated activities for this resource.
4. Explore opportunities for CAMH to partner with an appropriate community agency to provide *Strengthening Families* to members of the Iranian community. This comprehensive, evidence-based program promotes family cohesion and resiliency among youth aged 7 to 11 and responds well to the community's interest in parenting and prevention programs for youth.

Appendix A: Results of Needs Assessment administered at the Community Information Forum, March 4, 2007

Number of completed Needs Assessment tools: 115

Estimated attendance at forum at which needs assessment was completed: 225

1. What does mental health mean to you?

The main themes identified by participants are as follows:

- Having influence in society
- Enjoying of life
- Having the ability of making decisive decisions about life events
- Having adjustment to the society you live in and existing circumstances
- A feeling of security
- Having logical goals and ability to solve problem and sympathy
- Having the primary human rights
- To be able to function in the society and enjoy yourself
- Viewing life with a broader view, love to the environment you live and the others
- Having a proper understanding of realty and society
- Having love to life
- Freedom
- To live with a plan for life and look at the future with an optimistic view
- Being realistic to face life problems and cope with them
- Having a position and health attitude
- Being happy of what we have

- Ability to realize what is true
- Having a behaviour that the others enjoy being with you
- A person's ability to do every day life demands
- Having ability to face realities
- Ability to accept problems and to control them
- A very elusive concept
- A very important issue
- The ability of actualizing the potentials
- Having a proper function
- Having no problem in contacting with the others
- Having a balance in contacting with the others
- Having a balance in function, thoughts and experience
- Having control over every day life
- Having control to decide about what you like
- Having a feeling of happiness
- A harmonized relation of body, mind and affection
- A sense of satisfaction of life
- Living free of stress and tension
- Something equal to community's health
- A very complicated and difficult concept
- An important part of general health
- Some thing with an strong impact on physical health
- Some thing having a positive impact on society and other people
- Being free from personal and social problems
- Being relaxed
- Having balance in all aspects of life

- Happiness, satisfaction, using all life opportunities
- Being capable to cope with unpleasant situations in every day life
- Ability to think properly
- Ability to appear relaxed in society, hurting no one
- Having knowledge about their needs, ambitions, desires and to differentiate between them
- Being able to find solutions to cope with stress
- Being free from worry
- Being positive and kind to the others
- Being hopeful about future
- To cope with stressors in the community and to react to them normally
- An optimistic life

2. What does mental illness mean to you?

The main themes identified by participants are as follows:

- Combination of factors preventing the control over health
- Lack of balance between mental expectations and the society's circumstances
- The most awful disease
- Being under high stress
- Lack of balance in function
- Not having insight about surroundings
- Having abnormal talking
- Not being able to solve one's problems
- Being disabled by every day stresses
- Being despaired by overwhelming problems
- Having unreasonable reactions to opposite views
- Unreasonable worry and fear

- A mental state leading to pain and long term negative effects
- Lack of motivation, indecisiveness
- Lack of attention to one's feelings
- Inability to differentiate between reality and imagination
- Not having mental and physical activity
- Having negative thoughts
- Showing no respect to law
- Hurting the others
- Any thing that causes negative attitudes
- Lack of mood balance
- Not having routine function in society
- Having problem in contact with society
- Loss of interest in life
- Loss of self esteem
- Loss of concentration
- Lack of balance in person's behaviour
- A feeling of sadness
- Negative attitudes toward life
- Un adjustment with the others
- Feeling of not belonging to society
- Not accepting the existing circumstances
- Social pressure
- Not being able to think healthy about life
- Something starting with overloaded stress
- Fleeing from friends and society
- Any kind of disease preventing a person to benefit from normal life

- Not having control over thoughts
- Not being in harmony with society
- Experiencing awful stresses
- Not enjoying from life and being unable to understand essential life's responsibilities
- Not having balance in all issues
- Suffering, being unhappy, being disappointed
- Not being able to adjust with unpleasant situations
- Not having control over one's behaviour
- Being weak against life's unpleasant situations
- Hurting the others
- Not having adequate knowledge about their needs, ambitions, desires
- Not having control over anger
- Getting angry without any reason
- A disease that makes a person pessimistic about the others
- Any kind of an adjustment within the frame of Canadian capitalist society
- Not having normal reaction to social contacts

3. From your perspective what are the main mental health issues and challenges in the Iranian community?"

Problems and issues identified:

- Stress due to financial problems
- Youth problem
- Marital conflict
- Immigration issues
- Narrow-mindedness and lack of tolerance for the other nationalities
- Stress due to adjustment with new culture
- Homesickness

- Stresses due to immigration
- Not getting real status after immigration
- Lack of confidence
- Low self-esteem
- Stress due to cultural problem
- Stress due to lack of proper support
- Stress due to not knowing language
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Disrespect
- Shame and embarrassment about mental illness
- Not acknowledging mental health problems
- Addiction
- Lack of knowledge about treatment centers
- Lack of knowledge about mental health
- Generation gap and parental conflict with their young children
- Role confusion
- Depersonalization
- Lack of knowledge about adjustment with new society
- Lack of cohesion in Iranian community
- Stress due to lack of acknowledgment by Canadian government
- Lack of adjustment with new society
- Hiding and denying mental health problems
- Lack of understanding of youth needs
- Violence among youth
- Lack of counselling centers for Iranian

- Loneliness
- Not accepting new society
- Conflict of interests in values of Iranian cultures and Canadian culture
- Not having hope to future
- Lack of knowledge about parenting

4. What are some of the factors that contribute to mental health problems among members of the Iranian community?

Participants were asked to check off all the factors that were applicable. The findings are as follows:

- 42% identified "racism and discrimination "
- 82% identified "unemployment and underemployment"
- 60% identified "adjusting to the Canadian culture "
- 56% identified "family conflict"
- 67% identified "language barriers"
- 58% identified "cultural barriers"
- 70% identified "financial problems"
- 60% identified "worry about family or friends left behind"

Other factors that were identified were:

- No institution useful for Iranian
- Separation of the community from each other
- Long waiting lists for services
- Not knowing language
- Intolerance toward other cultures (Iranians experience discrimination when they settle in Canada)
- Generation gap
- Immigration status
- Lack of support system

- Lack of specialist in mental health
- Misunderstanding of immigration
- Lack of knowledge about homosexuals
- Not acceptance of sexual freedom of youth for Iranian community
- Loss of Identity, alteration of status (descending socio-economy status)
- Disrespect in the workplaces, mistrust to Iranian community
- Addiction
- Fighting with the culture
- Being apart from the origin
- Not knowing who we are and what we want
- Cultural shock and conflict with new society
- Not having an emphatic friend
- Not recognizing Iranian credentials by Canadian employers
- Lack of ability to function in both culture

5. From your perspective, are there some people that are more vulnerable to having mental health problems?

- 83% of participants answered " yes"
- 3% of participants answered " no:
- 14% did not respond

If yes, identify groups you think are vulnerable.

- 62% identified "youth"
- 52% identified "women"
- 37% identified "children"
- 43% identified "seniors"

Other groups that were identified were:

- Men (9%)

- Newcomers (5%)
- People with disability (4%)
- Homosexuals (3%)

6. What are some things that you, a friend or a family member would find helpful in alleviating mental health problems? Check off all the factors that were applicable.

- 57% identified "community education"
- 56% identified "information on services for mental health problems"
- 57% identified "mental health services that are culturally appropriate"
- 62% identified "reduction in the cultural and language barriers that limit access to education, employment, housing, health care, and support for problems"

Other factors that were identified were:

- Availability of Iranian institution
- Availability of Iranian professionals
- Raising awareness of people toward being in new society
- Educate people about immigration
- Parents understanding
- Believe in God
- Help to find job
- Establishing a real association for Iranian community
- Considering some courses for Iranian health professionals to adjust with new workplaces
- Having a united community

7. What is the right time to seek help when you are experiencing a mental health problem?

- 62% identified "right away—as soon as a person begins to "feel differently"

- 22% identified “when there is a crisis”
- 16% identified “when the problem becomes unmanageable”

8. When you, a friend or a family needs help for a mental health problem, where do you go? Check all items that are applicable.

- 47% identified “family doctor”
- 63% identified “mental health professional”
- 24% identified “community agency”
- 34% identified “information sources like books, newspapers, magazines, and internet”
- 29% identified “trusted community member”
- 30% identified “family or friends”

Other things that were identified were (Note: the responses below were not considered statistically significant—made by one respondent):

- Praying
- An Iranian physician who believes God
- Those friends experienced the same problem

9. What barriers do you, a friend or a family member experience when trying to access services for mental health problems? Check all items that are applicable.

- 48% identified “hard to get an appointment; waiting lists are long”
- 48% identified “language barriers”
- 34% identified “cultural barriers”
- 20% identified “transportation”
- 53% identified “lack of information about available services for mental health problems”
- 43% identified “limited services available in Farsi”

Other barriers that were identified were:

- Wrong system of mental health in Canada

- No attention to preventive factors
- Lack of trust to service providers
- Fear of disclosure of information
- Lack or shortage of services, especially in Farsi
- Prescription of an out of date medicine
- Rules governing Canada's mental health system
- Lack of Iranian psychiatrist
- High cost of services
- Ignorance

10. If you, a friend or a family member had a mental health problem would you feel comfortable disclosing it to anyone?

- 57% of participants answered "yes"
- 34% of participants answered "no"
- 9% of participants did not respond

11. What are some of the issues that inhibit you, a friend or family member from sharing concerns about mental health problems? Check all that apply.

- 59% identified "fear about being judged by members of my community"
- 59% identified "concern for my job, education or personal life if it is known that I or my family members has a mental health problem"
- 13% identified "mental health problems are confidential and should be kept in the family"
- 18% identified "I do not want to be seen by anyone in the community as needing help"

Other factors that were identified were:

- Being suspicious about capability of service providers confidentiality
- Fear of losing child custody due to incapability
- Fear of labelling

- Lack of knowledge about mental health professionals

12. Have you tried to access services for a mental health problem before?

- 44% of participants answered "yes"
- 39% of participants answered "no"
- 17% of participants did not respond

If yes, what was the experience like?

- 46% identified it as "good"
- 13% identified it as "bad or with little effect" (Note: further breakdown of this response is 9% responded "bad", 4% responded "little effect")

41% of those responding to this question provided additional comments on their experience of trying to access services, which included:

- Only taking medicines
- Not proper care, long waiting list
- Prescription of outdated medicines
- Painful to accept having a problem
- Disappointing
- Family physicians and pharmacist have no information and could not provide guidance
- Costly
- Quit while not completed (clarification of this point: did not stay in treatment program)
- Difficult due to legal regulation in hospitals

13. Where do you prefer to receive services for mental health? Check all that apply.

- 48% identified "an Iranian service provider"
- 25% identified "mainstream service provider"
- 32% identified "family doctor"

- 20% identified "hospital"
- 14% identified "family or friends"

Other items that were identified were:

- Iranian psychiatrist
- Books
- Reliable expert
- Someone who really loves his job and is empathic

14. In addition to the formal medical services available for mental health problems, what sources of help do you make use of? Check all that apply.

- 25% identified: "friends and family"
- 39% identified: "community agencies"
- 63% identified: "information I obtain from books, magazines, newspapers, internet etc."
- 49% identified: "stress management strategies like meditation, exercise, and nutrition"
- 20% identified: "services associated with my neighbourhood school, community centre"

Other sources that were identified were:

- Praying
- Police
- Counselling

15. What is the best way to provide information to the community on mental health problems? Check all that apply.

- 67% identified "workshops/ seminars"
- 62% identified "television program in our mother tongue"
- 53% identified "pamphlet or newspaper in our mother tongue"
- 26% identified "posters"

- 33% identified "internet"
- 50% identified "deliver health messages through community agencies"
- 24% identified "over the phone"
- 47% identified "deliver health messages through cultural programs"

Other ways that were identified were:

- An organization to take care of families and to educate them about mental health
- Providing services through cultural and social organization
- Direct contact
- Services in hospitals in Farsi
- Small group sessions including people having common problem

16. In the Iranian community what would be some ways of making it more acceptable to talk about mental health problems? Check all items that apply.

- 45% identified "people sharing their personal stories of living with a mental illness"
- 61% identified "ongoing communication in the media (newspaper, radio, TV, magazines)"
- 53% identified "starting early by educating children and youth in schools about mental health problems"

Other ways that were identified were:

- Close relationship between parents and children following Iranian cultures
- To find some method proper for our community
- To talk more and more about it

17. Identify areas you would like to learn more about. Check all items that are applicable.

- 56% identified "stress"
- 51% identified "parenting"

- 24% identified "alcohol and drug problems"
- 43% identified "adjusting to life in Canada"
- 59% identified "mental health concerns: what to do"

Other items that were identified were:

- Youth mental health problems
- How to adjust with Canadian Culture
- How to battle with depression
- Youth addiction
- How to deal with mentally ill person
- Some information about autism
- How to have constructive relationships with our daughters aged 18–24

18. What do you think the Iranian community can do together to address mental health problems? Check all items that apply.

- 51% identified "establish a work group who will investigate ways of having more services made available for members of the Iranian community"
- 43% identified "lobby for more services"
- 50% identified "establish support groups for individuals and family members affected by mental health problems"
- 45% identified "involve community leaders and stakeholders in the process of securing more services for community members"

Other ways that were identified were:

- Conducting more information forums/seminars
- To invite mentally ill patients to seminars to talk about their experiences
- Giving priority to those who experience mental health problems
- Helping each other
- Using newcomer youth (Note: this is meant to say involve Iranian youth who are new to Canada)

- To report crimes to police
- Establish a group home for Iranian community

19. At the end of the feedback form, participants were given the opportunity to list any other issues that were not included.

Issues identified:

- Request for more seminars (by many participants)
- Lack of services and professionals to help Iranian community and youth in particular, considering sensitivity in Iranian culture
- Request to provide more time for question and answer in future seminars
- Thanks for questionnaire
- Request to inform community about the questionnaire results
- Request to help Iranian community to develop a culture appropriate for them instead of adopting it entirely

Appendix B: Results of the Feedback Forms completed by attendees at the Community Information Forum, March 4, 2007

Number of completed feedback forms: 145

Number of people estimated to have attended forum: 225

1. How did you hear about the event?

- 46% identified "Iranian magazines"
- 8% identified "Radio"
- 13% identified "TV"
- 13% identified "Friends"
- 10% identified "A service provider"
- 10% identified "Flyer"

2. Please tell us a bit about yourself by checking the box that best describes you.

- 29% identified "Family member or friend of someone experiencing problems"
- 15% identified "Service Provider"
- 5% identified "Individual with experience in the mental health or addiction treatment systems"
- 48% identified "someone interested in mental health topics"
- 3% identified "other" (journalist/teacher)

3. Did the event meet your expectations?

- 74% of participants answered "yes"
- 19% of participants answered "no"
- 7% of participants did not respond

If not, what was missing?

- Topics were general and not specific
- Time was too short
- Forum could not address the topics in depth
- There was nothing about youth problems
- There was no psychiatrist among the speakers
- There was no solution for problems
- There was no movie about mental health

4. Did you receive the information you hoped for?

- 71% of participants answered "yes"
- 18% of participants answered "no"
- 11% of participants did not respond

If not, what was missing?

- Not providing practical strategies
- Information about depression
- Information about parenting skills
- Information about addiction

5. Did you learn anything new?

- 79% of participants answered "yes"
- 13% of participants answered "no"
- 8% of participants did not respond

If yes, what items?

- Some information about CAMH
- Good definition of mental health
- New definitions of psychological terms

- Signs of having a mental health problem
- Mental illness and stigma
- That stress is not always a pathological thing
- Antidepressant drugs are not always the best solution
- Getting hope to better life
- Immigration and mental illness
- That there is need to hard work for mental health promotion
- That there are many people experiencing mental health problems
- All topics presented were helpful
- Socialization in Canadian community
- The importance of establishing support group for Iranian community
- Information about social services providers and psychologist in Toronto
- Information about how to improve personal and social behaviours
- Information about negative attitudes toward mental illness
- Information about how to cope better with problems
- How to transfer information to the others
- The effect of having a mentally patient in family system
- How to seek help for mental health
- Better help to patient
- To know stress better than before

6. What will you do with the information you gained today?

- To try to encourage those who have mental health problem to get help
- To share with my friends
- To help better the others
- To help families I am working with
- To have a view broader to my life

- To have better feeling toward mentally ill people
- To have better attitudes toward barriers and difficulties in my life
- To get more relaxed and compassionate
- To communicate better with my family
- To work better with my clients
- To solve my problem
- To get support for mental health problem
- To cope better with the patient in my family
- To transfer this information to the others

7. What next steps would you like to see the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health undertake in this area?

- To follow up the result of needs assessment done in this forum and feed back to community members
- To continue such seminars in future
- To conduct more specific information sessions
- To conduct more conference and meeting about mental health
- To provide information about available services in mental health
- To conduct some information forum parenting skills
- To conduct some information forum about addiction – 12 steps
- To support Iranian community to conduct such seminars
- To Listen and understand Iranian community's needs about mental health
- To provide more psychiatrist / psychologist covered by OHIP
- To establish a center for Iranian community
- To help to establish Iranian centers in Toronto
- To establish some speech therapy centers
- To provide facilities to Iranian community
- To help Iranian community to find solutions for mental health in Iranian

immigrant

- To make mental treatment mandatory
- To provide workshops about practical strategies
- To focus on primary prevention
- To support establishing a group home for Iranian
- To help our community to access necessary services
- To help us get some fund for research in mental health
- To take Iranian community needs as serious
- To facilitate access to treatment
- To establish a center for Iranian families to get mental health services

8. Do you have any suggestions for future topics?

- Seminars should be more detailed and practical
- Providing some solutions to mental health problem
- Addiction
- Addiction in youth
- Parenting skills
- How to cope with stress
- Self awareness
- Immigrant problems in new circumstances and the sources of their risk factors
- How to cope with youth problems
- More practical strategies for mental health problem
- How to prevent mental health problems
- How to cope with stress
- Self awareness and how to get control over health
- Speech therapy

- Specific seminar for each topic
- Information about centers supporting the addicted families
- Small groups including people challenging a common mental health problem

9. Please rate your satisfaction with this forum by checking the appropriate box where "1" is the "least satisfied" and "5" is the "most satisfied."

- 1% of participants identified "one"
- 8% of participants identified "two"
- 30% of participants identified "three"
- 25% of participants identified "four"
- 25% of participants identified "five"
- 11% did not respond

10. At the end participants were asked to indicate any other suggestions or comments they had:

- To help establish a community group to follow up the needs assessment done in this forum
- To address the needs expressed in this forum
- Seminars should be continued, more in depth with more specific items
- To conduct more informational forums for men about cultural differences of here and back home
- To focus more on cultural issues
- As the first step it was very nice and more than our expectations
- Request to establish support group in Iranian community
- Request to provide more Iranian psychiatrist
- Request to give facility to Iranian mental health professional to help Iranian patients
- Request to establish a community group to support Iranian patients having mental health problems

- Request to keep being in touch about upcoming events through sending email to audiences