

Community Listening Ears Focus Group



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Introduction

Project Background

This report explores the impact of mental health on relationships among Congolese individuals residing in Newham. Through a focus group discussion, participants from diverse backgrounds—representing different ages and genders—shared their experiences and perspectives on how mental health issues affect their personal and social relationships. The findings offer valuable insights into the community's unique experiences, highlighting both the challenges faced and the coping strategies individuals use to manage mental health within their relationships.

Methodology

The data for this report was gathered through a focus group discussion involving 26 participants from the Congolese community in Newham, with 16 females and 10 males. Participants were aged 30 and above and identified as Black African, specifically Congolese (from the Democratic Republic of Congo).

The focus group took place on 17th June 2024 and was organised in collaboration with the Airs Ministry Church and New Way Group. The participants were drawn from the East Ham and Canning Town areas, providing a representative sample of the local Congolese community.

The discussion was facilitated in a group setting, encouraging open dialogue and the sharing of personal experiences regarding the impact of mental health on relationships. The information collected offers valuable insights into the community's perspectives on this issue and the specific challenges they face in maintaining personal and social relationships.

Key Findings

Stigma and Cultural Perceptions

Mental health issues are often stigmatised within the Congolese community, which can lead individuals to hide their struggles instead of seeking help. This stigma exacerbates the impact on relationships, as individuals may avoid discussing their mental health challenges with partners, family members, or friends. Many participants noted that mental health problems are sometimes viewed as a weakness or, in some cases, a spiritual issue, rather than a medical condition. This cultural belief can prevent individuals from seeking appropriate help and may affect how support is given and received within relationships.

Family Dynamics

Mental health challenges significantly affect family relationships, particularly in terms of communication. Several participants shared that individuals experiencing mental health issues often withdraw from family interactions, resulting in misunderstandings and conflict. Additionally, traditional gender roles and expectations within families can compound the stress experienced by individuals with mental health problems. For example, men often feel pressure to be the primary providers and may struggle to express vulnerability, while women may juggle caregiving roles, leading to burnout. This dynamic can further strain family relationships and impact overall wellbeing.

“I am the head of the family; stress is normal for me because I want my wife to stay home and look after the house while I do all the hard work.” *Participant from the focus group*

Social Isolation

Social isolation is another major concern linked to mental health issues. Many participants reported that individuals with mental health problems may avoid social gatherings and community events due to fear of being judged or misunderstood. This social withdrawal leads to increased isolation and loneliness, further exacerbating mental health challenges. However, the focus group also highlighted the importance of supportive social networks, such as those provided by the church and community groups, in mitigating the negative effects of isolation.



“People will laugh at me; they will think of me as a loser. I cannot let people see me in that state.”



Access to Mental Health Services

Access to mental health services is a significant barrier for many members of the Congolese community. Participants identified language barriers, a lack of awareness about available services, and mistrust of healthcare providers as key challenges. Some noted that there are limited resources available in their language, and the absence of interpreters makes it difficult for them to seek help. Participants expressed frustration that their community is large in Newham, yet often feels overlooked or underrepresented in mental health services. The need for culturally sensitive services was also emphasised, with participants stressing that mental health professionals who understand the cultural context of the Congolese community are crucial for providing effective support.

Impact on Children and Youth

The impact of mental health on children and youth was another significant concern raised by participants. Mental health issues can have intergenerational effects, with children struggling to understand a parent's mental health challenges. This can lead to anxiety, behavioural problems, and a lack of emotional support for both parents and children. Furthermore, participants noted a need for more education and awareness programmes targeting young people to help them understand mental health, reduce stigma, and foster healthier attitudes toward mental wellbeing. By increasing awareness among the younger generation, it is hoped that future generations will be more equipped to address mental health issues openly and effectively.

“We don’t have any leaflet available within our language and not many interpreters around. We are a lot in Newham but we are not counted among the many in Newham.” – **Participant from the focus group**

Recommendations

Community Education and Awareness

To reduce the stigma surrounding mental health within the Congolese community, it is crucial to develop community-based education programmes. These initiatives should aim to raise awareness about mental health issues, their impact, and the importance of seeking support. Additionally, engaging respected community leaders and influencers can play a key role in spreading information, challenging negative perceptions, and promoting a more positive, open attitude towards mental health. By using culturally relevant messaging and platforms, these efforts can have a greater impact and reach a wider audience.

Improving Access to Services

It is essential to enhance the availability and accessibility of culturally sensitive mental health services for the Congolese community. This includes providing mental health services that consider the unique cultural, social, and religious contexts of the community. Training healthcare providers to understand these cultural factors will enable them to offer more tailored support and foster trust within the community. Additionally, increasing the availability of services in multiple languages and ensuring that interpreters are readily available will help bridge the gap in access to care for those who face language barriers.

Strengthening Support Networks

To combat the isolation that often accompanies mental health challenges, it is important to encourage the development of local support groups. These groups can provide a safe space for individuals to share experiences, offer peer support, and reduce feelings of loneliness. Promoting family counselling services can also help strengthen relationships and improve communication within families, particularly where mental health issues are causing misunderstandings or conflict. By offering resources and guidance for families to navigate these challenges, we can create a more supportive and understanding environment for individuals dealing with mental health issues.

Targeted Support for Youth

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of mental health issues, especially when they are impacted by a family member's mental health struggles. Implementing targeted mental health programmes in schools can help raise awareness among students and provide early intervention for those in need. These programmes should aim to educate children and teenagers about mental health, reduce stigma, and promote a healthier attitude towards seeking help. Creating safe spaces within schools and community centres where young people can openly discuss their mental health and access support services will empower them to take control of their wellbeing and reduce the long-term effects of mental health challenges.

Conclusion

Mental health has a profound impact on relationships within the Congolese community in Newham. To mitigate these effects, it is essential to address the stigma surrounding mental health, improve access to culturally sensitive services, and strengthen support networks. By fostering a more supportive and understanding environment, the community will be better equipped to navigate the challenges of mental health and improve their interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, it is evident that the community places more trust in their pastors than in health and social care services, highlighting the importance of engaging community leaders in mental health initiatives.

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