



Queensland Transcultural Mental Health Centre

Topics in focus

Challenges and opportunities when working as a bicultural worker

Being a bicultural worker can be very rewarding. Bicultural workers work across different mental health settings and across the spectrum of interventions. This gives an opportunity to experience a diverse range of mental health presentations as well as gain highly transferrable knowledge and skills in mental health assessment and prevention. Some common challenges bicultural workers can experience (and ideas to manage them) include:

- Knowing when it is appropriate for you to use your language skills. You can use your language skills when you are talking directly to a consumer or their family. Your role is to provide cultural context to the clinician and to help the consumer navigate and engage with service providers. You may be asked by the mental health clinician to help explain some points in-language. But there should be a dialogue between yourself and the clinician that is consultative in nature, as opposed to merely translating the session.
- Gender, ethnicity, religious, age, class or tribal affiliations of consumers will determine whether a specific bicultural worker is engaged. Let the clinician know when there are specific cultural or social factors to consider when requesting you.
- Feeling as if you are representing your cultural group or that you should know everything related to your culture. It is important to acknowledge the context in which you provide cultural input and the limits of what you can comment on. It is ok to say you don't know or are unsure about something. Your input comes from your own personal cultural experiences and any comments you make must be considered within the broader socio-cultural context. Also, it is

important to remember that there is diversity *within* the same culture, just as there is diversity *across* cultures.

- Feeling intimidated or uncertain because you do not have mental health qualifications or have not worked in a mental health setting before. Mental health clinicians may use terms that you are not familiar with. Ask them to explain when they use words you do not know. The clinician who has engaged you to do work is responsible for explaining the setting in which you will be working with consumers and discussing any relevant background, as well as jointly developing a plan for the session with you.
- When you work with a consumer you already know, perhaps they are a friend or acquaintance from the community, it can be difficult to manage confidentiality and boundaries. The clinician you are working with should check beforehand whether you already know a client and discuss options as to how to manage potential conflict of interests.
- Managing cultural expectations within an Australian workplace can be challenging. When consumers are working with someone from their own community, they may have certain expectations. Sometimes these expectations do not match what is expected of you as a professional. Discuss any issues with the clinician who has engaged you for work. We rely on you to tell us when there are expectations from a consumer that need to be considered. We will seek guidance from you about how we can make sure we meet the cultural needs and preferences of our consumers.
- Managing the stigma that can be associated with mental illness can be confronting. Being aware of your own biases and not making assumptions about a consumer (even though they may be from your own community) are important steps in managing stigma. Discuss any concerns with the clinician you are working with.
- Working with consumers with whom you share similar life experiences or who have suffered similar trauma or stressors can be challenging. Vicarious trauma (or secondary stress you feel through another person) can be experienced by anyone working with traumatized individuals as they become witnesses to the pain endured by trauma survivors. It is vital that you are aware of the signs of vicarious trauma and the potential emotional effects of working with trauma survivors. Get support by ringing one of the Metro South Health [employee assistance providers](#) to access free counselling.