

Strengthening Peer Support for Newcomers: A Culturally-Responsive, Trauma-Informed Model for Settlement Services

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Pathways to Prosperity 2025 National Conference

Tuesday, November 25, 2025 3:30 - 4:45 PM



Funded by:

Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Financé par :

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

Learning Objectives

After participating in this workshop, attendees will have:

- 1** Understand key mental health challenges faced by immigrant and refugee newcomers
- 2** Explore the role of peer support as an accessible, culturally, and linguistically responsive approach to newcomer mental health
- 3** Learn practical steps to design and launch a peer support group with minimal resources
- 4** Identify strategies for sustainability and integration of peer support within community and organizational contexts.

Ice Breaker

What is one small way someone has supported you recently (professionally or personally), and why did it make a difference?



Mental Health Promotion in Immigrant & Refugee Serving Organizations Project

- Originated as an innovation project (2018 - 2021) funded by IRCC through the Settlement Program Service Delivery Improvements Funding (SDI) Stream
- Continues to be funded as part of the ongoing capacity building initiatives at OCASI (2021-2025) and again (2025- 2028)



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Project Goals

- To build the capacity of immigrant and refugee services to promote mental health and newcomer wellbeing and respond to mental health issues within organizations.
- The project aims to strengthen collaborations and partnerships between the three sectors of settlement, community mental health, and primary care.
- Through the development and implementation of an integrated service delivery model for mental health promotion.

Current Project Partners

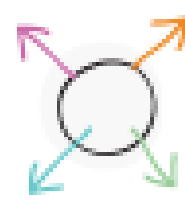
- Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
- Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT)
- Catholic Crosscultural Services (CCS)
- Le Conseil Économique et Social d'Ottawa Carleton (CÉSOC)
- Community Development Council Durham (CDCD)
- COSTI Immigrant Services
- Hong Fook Mental Health Association
- Immigrants Working Centre (IWC)
- Kababayan Multicultural Centre (KMC)
- Mennonite New Life Centre (MNLCT)
- Northwest London Resource Centre (NWLRC)
- Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS)
- Rexdale Women's Centre
- The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO)
- Warden Woods Community Centre
- Crossroads Clinic, Women's College Hospital
- YMCA of Southwestern Ontario
- YWCA Hamilton
- YWCA Toronto

OCASI
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

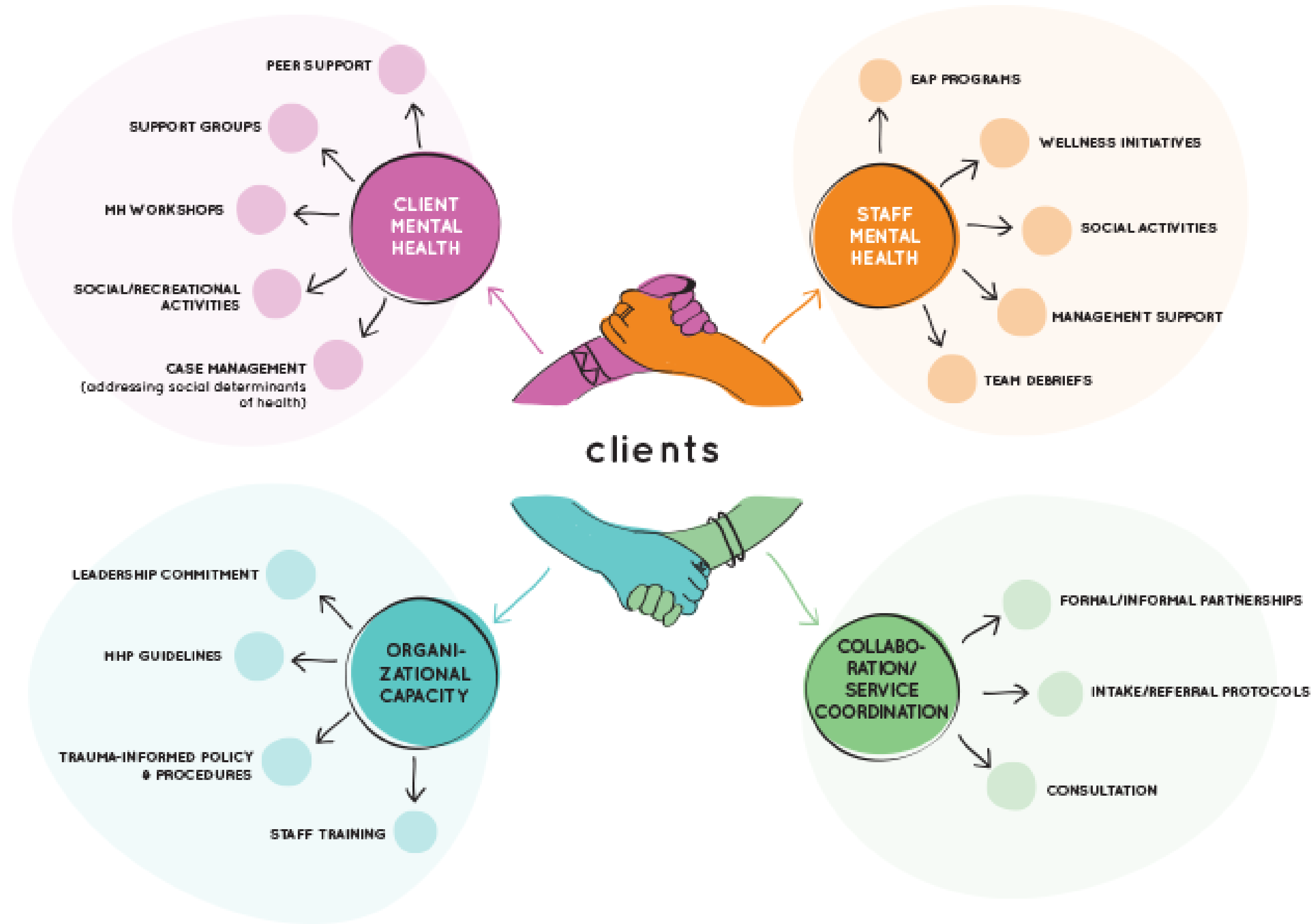




MHP Advisory Committee



MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION INTEGRATED SERVICE MODEL



Model Implementation (2022 - 2025)



2022- 2023 (Spring)

2023- 2024 (Fall)

2023 - 2024

2024- 2025



Scaling Up! 2025 - 2026



Why Peer Support?



Common Stressors Impacting Newcomers

- Trauma and culture shock
- Social and geographical isolation
- Resettlement and family adjustment challenges
- Heightened social anxiety post-pandemic
- Financial strain, housing, and food insecurity
- Un/underemployment and deskilling
- Fear of sharing struggles with family back home
- Heightened stress and burnout
- Intimate partner violence
- Racism, Islamophobia, and discrimination
- Language and communication barriers



Barriers to Accessing MH Supports

- Stigma and mistrust surrounding mental health
- Geographical isolation and unreliable transportation
- Financial barriers and limited affordable options
- Inconvenient program timing that doesn't align with client schedules
- Limited culturally and linguistically appropriate referrals
- Long waitlists and lack of follow-up after referral

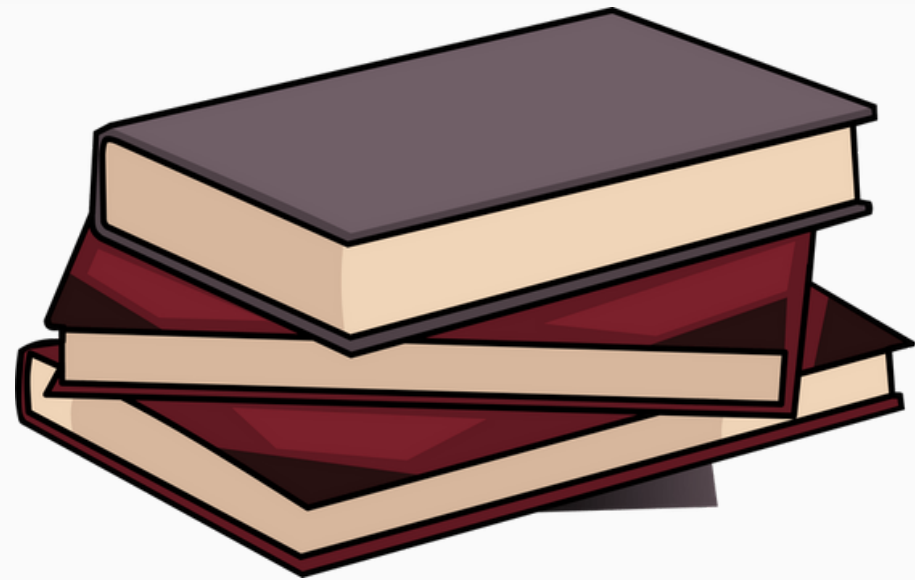


Frontline Staff Challenges

- Limited training to identify mental health concerns or use tools (ie. intake forms with MH questions, referral guide)
- Unclear referral pathways and lack of internal supports for connecting clients to mental health services
- Insufficient time to conduct follow-ups or provide ongoing support



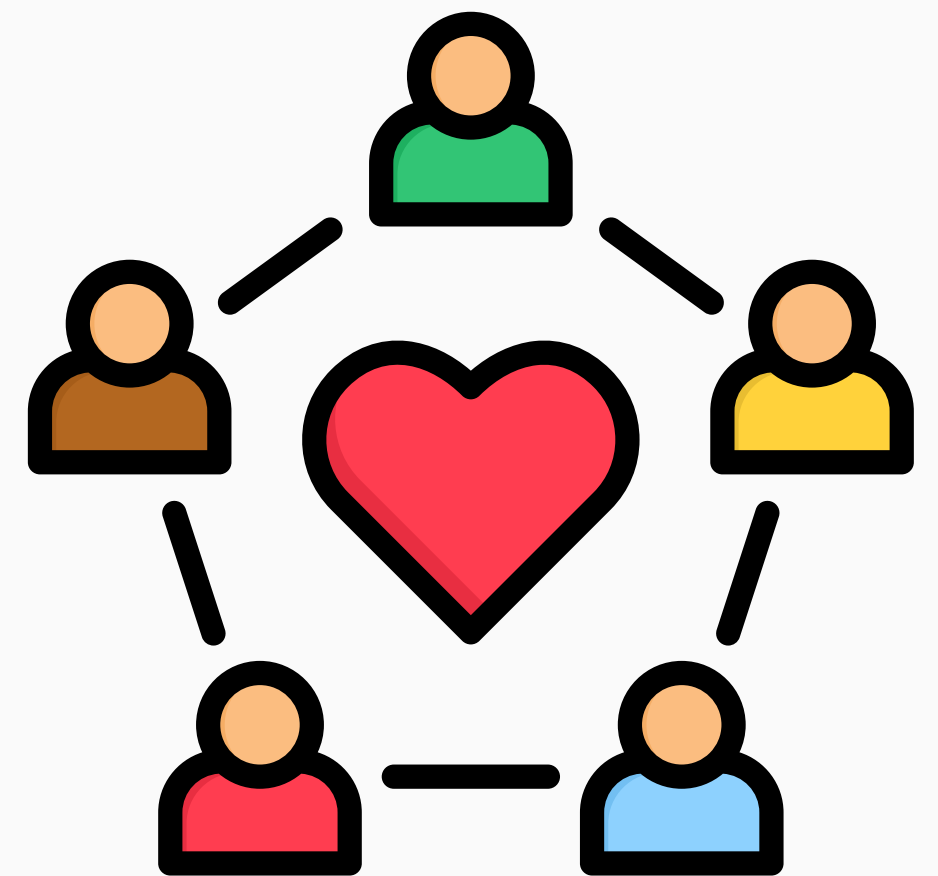
What the Research Shows...



- **Declining Health:** “Healthy Immigrant Effect” - newcomers arrive in good health, but systemic stressors and isolation worsen health overtime.
- **Systemic Barriers to Care:** Limited access to culturally and linguistically appropriate MH supports leads to unmet mental health needs.
- **Cultural Disconnect:** Services often overlook cultural values, lived experiences, intersecting identities, which increases mistrust of services.

What is peer support?

- Peer support is emotional and practical support between two people who share a common experience (Mental Health Commission of Canada)
- For newcomers, connecting with peers who has recently navigated settling in Canada can support the newcomer who may be struggling
- Creates safe, transformative spaces for healing and connection
- Grounded in the core principles of respect, mutuality, empathy, and shared understanding.



What the Research Shows...



- **Empowerment:** Builds confidence, coping skills, and self-advocacy.
- **Stigma Reduction:** Shared stories normalize MH and break silences in communities
- **Community Connections:** Strengthens belonging and ties to cultural and ethnic communities.
- **Culturally-Grounded Design:** Best when tailored to specific communities needs
- **Creative Expression and Healing:** Community art and storytelling foster belonging and connection.
- **Broader Impact:** Complements formal mental health systems by being accessible, low-cost, and culturally grounded.

(Barbaresos et al., 2023; UNHCR; Hernandez, 2015; Motia, 2023)

OCASI Peer Support Program

- Support agencies to implement 8-week peer support group program
- Identify clients population with significant mental health needs
- Recruit 2-4 facilitators to receive *CMHA Ontario Supporter Peer Group Facilitator Training*
- Conduct outreach, decide on group dates/timing/ location
- Evaluate through pre/post surveys



Canadian Mental
Health Association

CHAT & CHAI

HEALTH & WELLNESS PROMOTION

Come out to meet new people who are newcomers and share your stories of resilience and migration.

For registration contact: Christabell Selvalingham

Date: December 12th, 2019

Address: 925 Albion Road Etobicoke, ON M9V 1A6



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Lets Share Together

Newcomer Youth Peer Support Group

Come join us to share your stories of resilience and migration to support each other!

THURSDAYS | 4:30pm - 6pm

Ages 13-19 Newcomer Youth

3650 Dixie Rd Suite 103, Mississauga

For Registration Email:
jonathonm@dixiebloor.ca



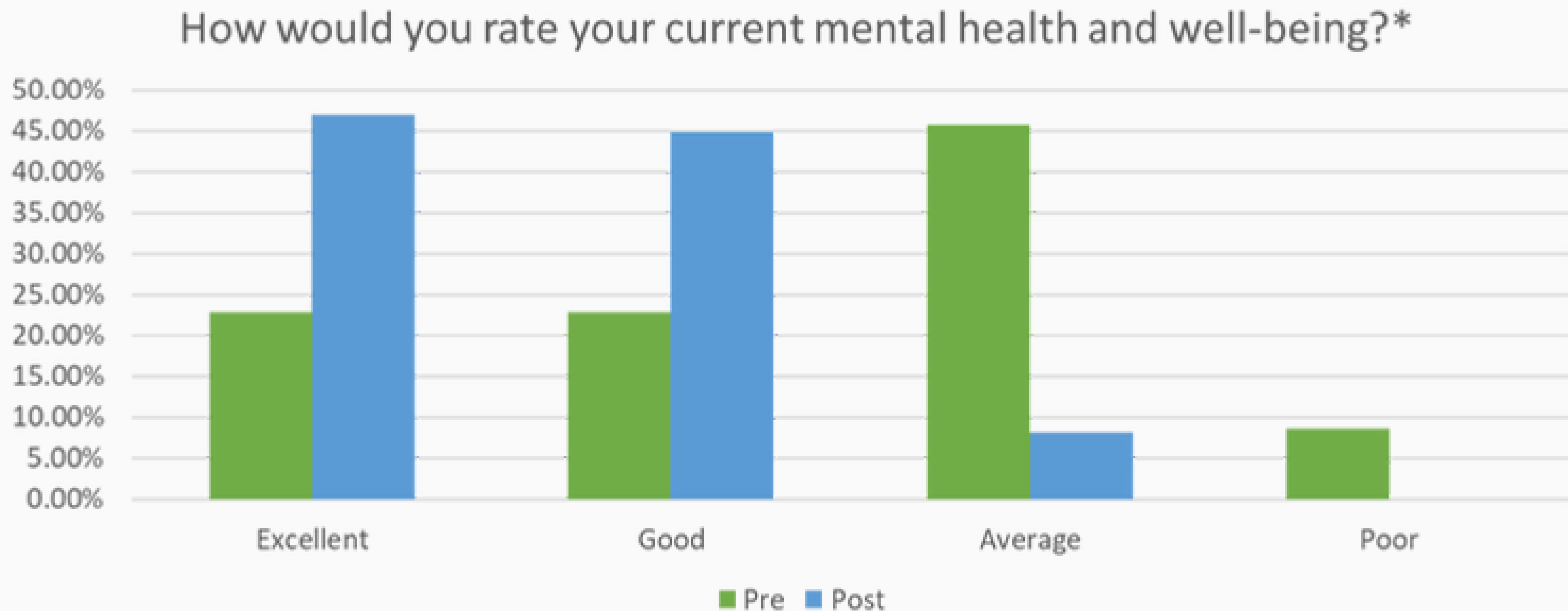
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Peer Support Survey Results



*Based on comparable data from 49 participants from 2022-2024. Non-comparable data is not included.



Key Considerations & Lessons Learned

- Choose a population in need of additional support/ underserved
- Will the group be open or closed?
- Who will the facilitators be? (Recruit at least 4)
- Do you have additional financial resources available?
- Consider access barriers and work to mitigate them
- Offer incentives for participation
- Cater topics and structure to the specific group- ask for their input
- Be clear about the purpose of the group, offer additional resources / referrals as needed



Kababayan Multicultural Centre

OCASI Mental Health Promotion
Project Implementation



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About Kababayan

Kababayan Multicultural Centre (KMC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the immigrant community in their successful settlement in Canada. Founded in 1977, KMC has been a strong advocate for immigrants from diverse backgrounds, providing client-centered and accessible services to newcomers, families, women and seniors.

- **Online and in-person services**
- **One-on-one needs & assets assessment and referrals**
- **Employment counselling**
- **Group information sessions and skills-building workshops**
- **Community connections**
- **Programs for racialized youth, women and seniors**



Challenges: Clients

KMC aims to tackle the mental health issues our clients encounter enabling them to access necessary resources and make well-informed decisions throughout their settlement process.



Family Dynamics

- Family Reunification
- Complex family dynamics
- Strained parent-child relationships

Systemic Barriers

- Lack of awareness for support
- Stigmas
- Social Isolation

Other Barriers

- Precarious Immigration Status
- No insurance/OHIP
- Long wait times for free services

Gaps/ Challenges: Staff/ Organizational Capacity

Benefits/Policies

- Lack of awareness/ understanding on benefits
- Need for development of mental health, trauma-informed policies

Organizational Structure

- No middle management leads to a lack of supervision and debriefing for staff
- Overwhelming workload for staff and management

Limited Resources

- KMC is operating over capacity, with insufficient mental health support available for clients due to limited resources
- Lack of funding to hire additional staff

Wellness Initiatives

- Lack of wellness initiatives
- Dilemma between workload and participation



Implemented Activities



Staff

- Hosted EAP information session
- Integrated wellness activities into monthly staff meetings
- Distributed self-care package to staff



Organizational Capacity

- Increased staff training related to mental health
- Onboarded MSW Student to support development of mental health/ trauma/ crisis intervention policies and protocols for clients and staff



Implemented Activities (Clients)



Clients

- Facilitated psychoeducational workshops for newcomer youth and families
- Increased wellness activities for clients



Activity Gallery



Implemented Activities (Clients)



International Student Peer Support Group

- **Participant Background**

- International students are often in precarious situations
- Limited services are available to them
- Within the last 5 years there is a huge increase in International students entering Canada
- Greatly affected with anti-immigrant hate

- **Topics discussed:**

- Self-Care
- Dealing with Stress
- Finding Employment
- Responding to racism
- What is mental health?

Global Connect:

International Student Peer Support Group

Share your experiences and build connections with a welcoming community of students from around the globe! We're here to support you on your journey.

Dates : Every Thursday from October 17 to December 5, 2024

Time : 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM

Location : Virtual

Register by scanning the QR Code

OCASI

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Client Testimonials



“It was really helpful especially when we get to talk to other students experiencing the same thing. It made me feel less alone in Canada .” – **Anonymous Participant**

“Coming here from the Philippines, I was determined to make Canada my new home but it was so hard. People here are very independent and everyone kept to themselves, being in the group made me feel like I was back home where I have friends who will support me ” – **Anonymous Participant**

“I learned so much from the people in the group. We are all from different colleges but our experiences are almost similar. Everyone is very helpful when sharing tips especially for someone like me who was only here for 6 months.” – **Anonymous Participant**

Challenges and Lessons Learned



◆ **Participant Retention:** Some participants only attended the initial sessions and did not return for the full duration of the peer support group.

◆ **Scheduling Conflicts:** Sessions were held during their midterm exams, affecting student availability and participation.

◆ **Expectation Gaps:** Some participants were seeking more immediate, tangible outcomes such as employment opportunities or immigration support, which were beyond the group's intended focus.

✓ **Key Takeaway:** Implement regular check-ins to gather feedback and explore adjustments to content and format that sustain engagement.

✓ **Key Takeaway:** Align future program schedules with academic calendars to avoid peak exam or study periods.

✓ **Key Takeaway:** Adopt a more holistic approach by integrating complementary services within the session (e.g., employment counselling, settlement support).

Next Steps



- Continue ongoing staff wellness initiatives.
- Onboard an MSW placement student to support the development of trauma-informed mental health and crisis intervention policies for both clients and staff.
- Incorporated prioritizing staff wellness as one of KMC's strategic objectives
- Expand programming with a stronger focus on client mental health:
 - FY 25-26, KMC recognized as a Seniors Active Living Centre (SALC)
 - Pending proposals:
 - Identify N' Impact Youth Grant – implement "Thrive Together": a peer-led wellness and skills-building initiative
- Developed partnership with CAMH's New Beginnings Clinic to enhance care consultations and build staff capacity in responding to mental health needs.



●●● Connect with KMC! ●●●



Phone Number

416-532-3888



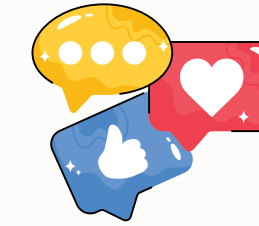
Website

kababayan.org



Email Address

info@kababayan.org



Social Media

[@KababayanMulticulturalCentre](https://www.instagram.com/KababayanMulticulturalCentre)



Locations

North York (Bathurst-Finch Hub)

540 Finch Ave West, North York, ON M2R 1N7

Downtown Toronto Office

1313 Queen St. West, Toronto, ON M6K 1L8

Toronto Public Library- Parkdale Branch

1303 Queen St. West, Toronto, ON M6K 1L6

Thank You!



YWCA Hamilton



Tehreem Zafar - Director, Health Equity & Settlement Services

Who We Are!



YWCA Hamilton: A non-profit organization serving the community for over a century serving over 10,000 clients each year through direct services and advocacy, locally and nationally.

Mission: Provide meaningful, accessible services to create opportunities, amplify voices, and co-create gender inclusive and equitable communities.

Vision: Envision an equitable world where women (cis and trans), girls, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people have the rights and resources to shape their own lives and lead their communities.

Core Values: Intersectional Feminism, People-Centred, Belonging, Responsibility, Partnerships



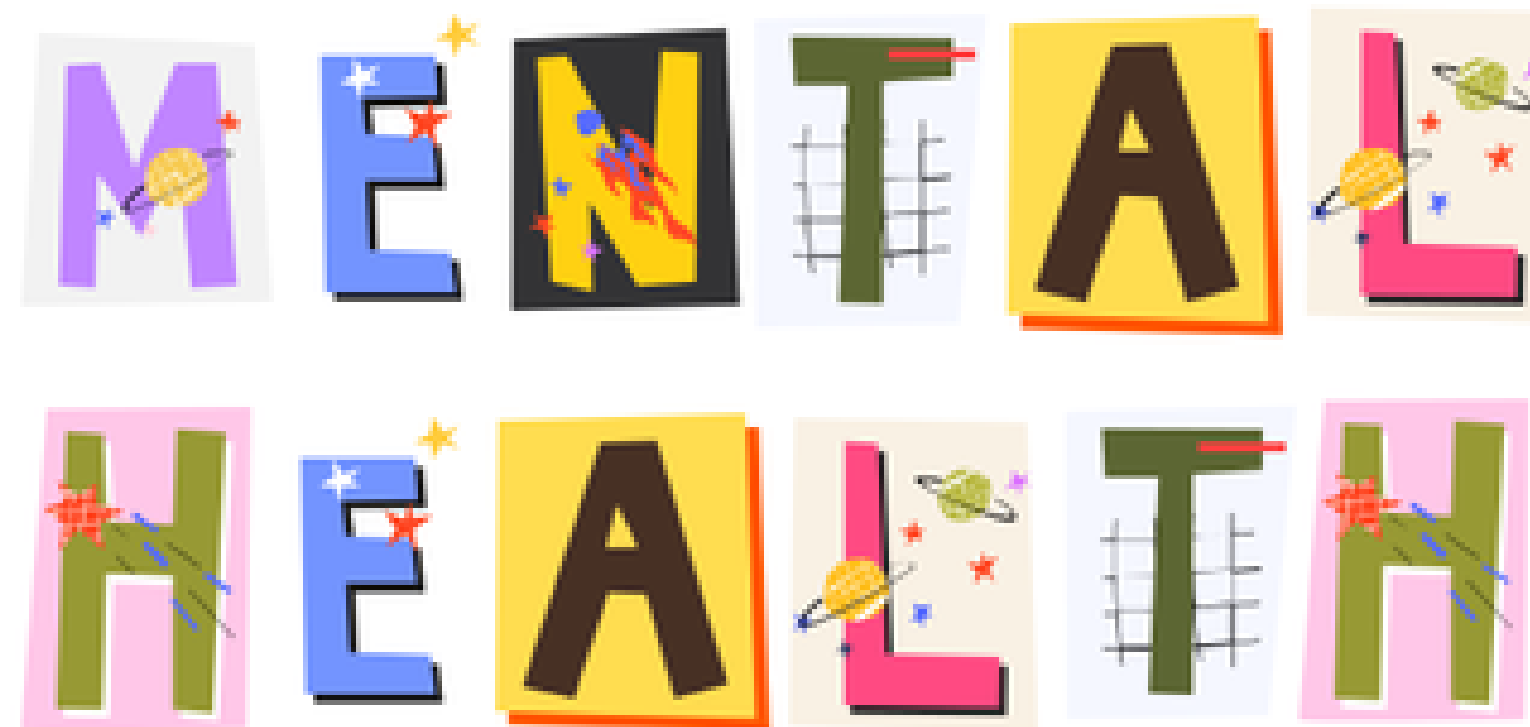
Immigrant & Settlement Service



YWCA Hamilton's Join Program is an immigration and settlement program designed specifically for newcomer women, youth and gender-diverse folks ages 15+. The purpose of Join is to help newcomers settle in their new community in every way possible.

- Settlement Counselling
- Employment Services
- Community & Cultural Connections
- Gender Based Violence Support
- 2SLGTBQIA+ Safe Spaces
- Library Settlement Partnership
- Asylum Seekers Support Program

Mental Health Promotion Project - OCASI



Needs Assessment



- Client Focus Group - Somali Women
- Staff Focus Group - Newcomer Program Staff
- Leadership Focus Group
- Staff Wellness Survey - All Staff

OCASI Mental Health Promotion



Working with Clients

Client Mental Health - Somali Group

Initial skepticism about sharing mental health struggles with service providers:

“Would this be another routine project triggering our vulnerabilities and emotions with no real solutions?”



Key Findings - Somali Group

- Language barriers causing isolation and hindering access to mental health resources
- Cultural shock and barriers to assimilation
- Challenges with family and children
- Facing Systemic discrimination - CAS and School Boards
- Mental health stigma within the community

Key Recommendations - Somali Group

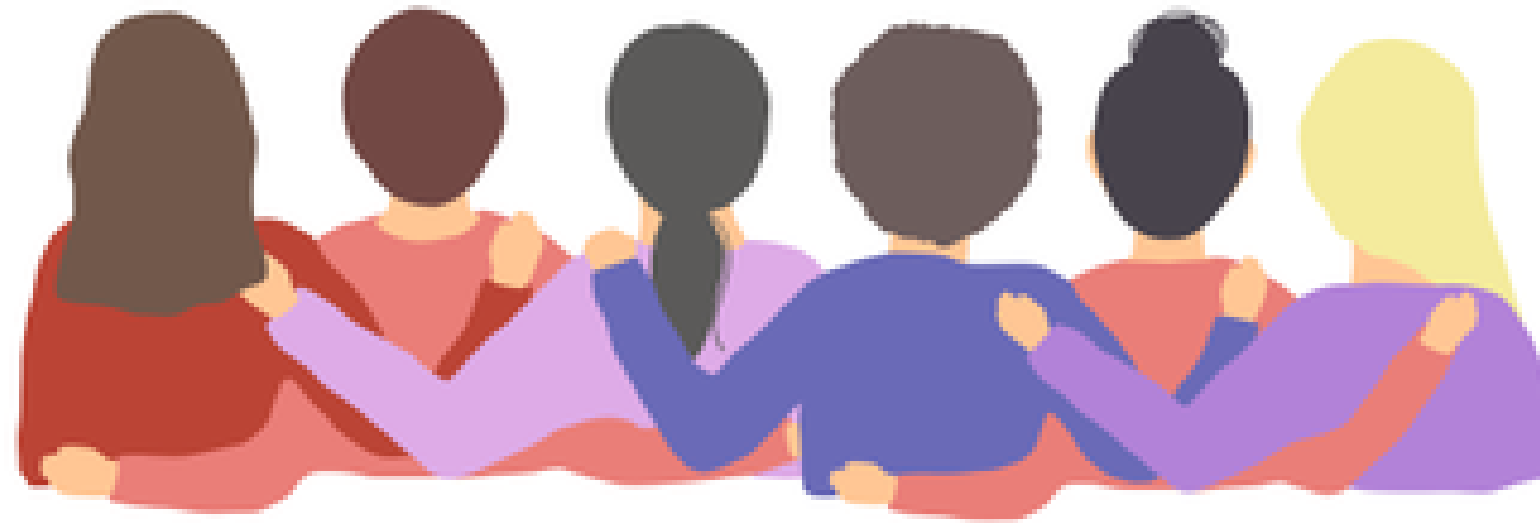
- Peer support group program for Somali women
- Partnerships with Somali-serving organizations to expand services
- Enhance referral pathways with mental health and health care providers
- Ongoing capacity building activities on mental health promotion



Key Implementations - Somali Group

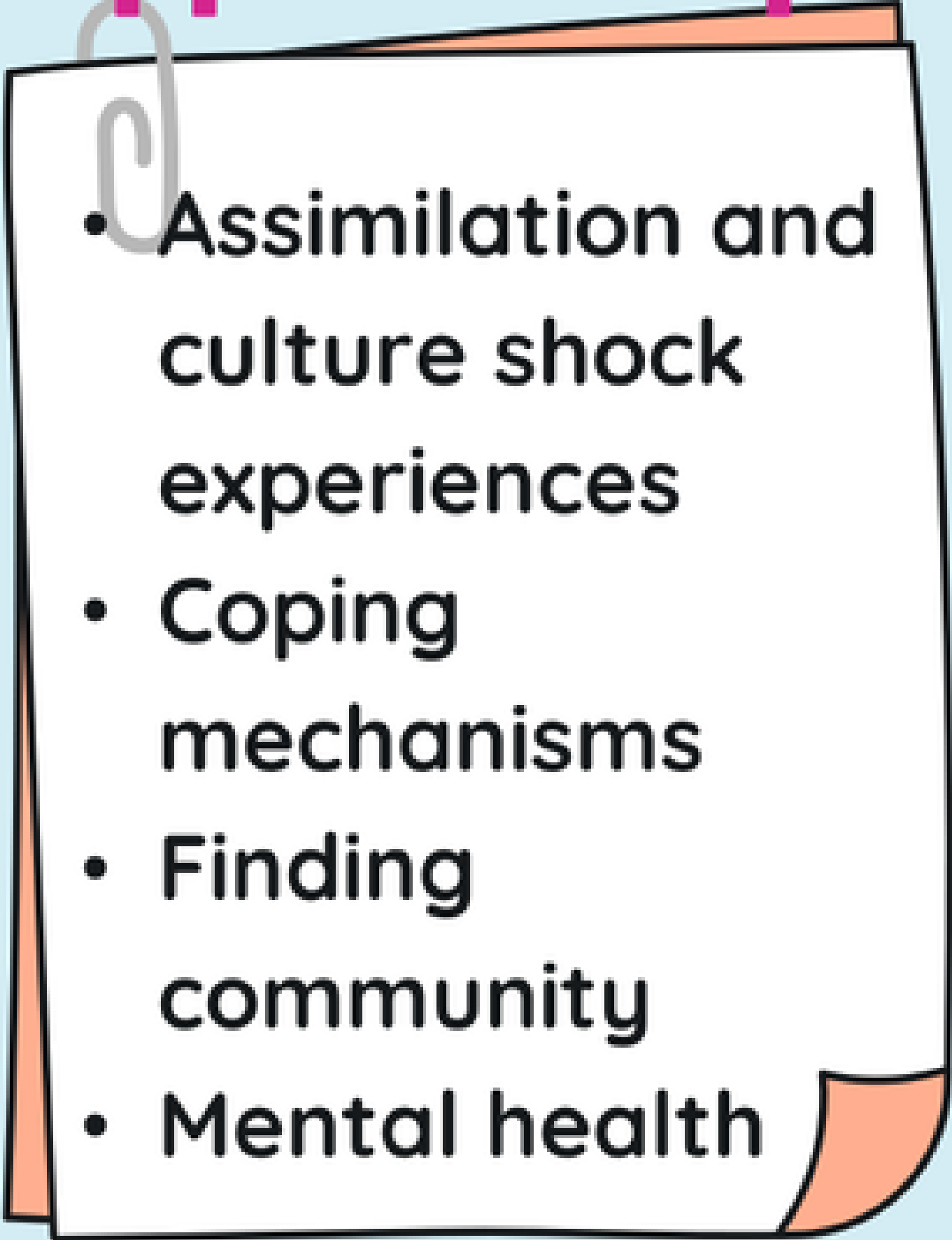
- Enhanced Trust with Action-Oriented Solutions and Transparency
- Recruitment and Training of Peer Leaders
- Successful Launch of Peer Support Groups
- Opportunities to enhance social networks and community connections through Peer Support Groups. Formats included:
 - Sewing Circles
 - Conversation Circles
 - Muslim Survivors Circles
 - Parents Mental Health Workshops
 - Mom & Youth Peer Relationship Building Sessions





Peer Support Groups

Peer Support Group Topics

- 
- Assimilation and culture shock experiences
 - Coping mechanisms
 - Finding community
 - Mental health

Challenges

- Training vs Retention of Peer Leaders
- Some participants were hesitant initially due to stigma around mental health and community privacy concerns.
- Discussing taboo subjects required careful facilitation, sensitivity to cultural norms, and thoughtful language.
- Managing passionate discussions without shutting down peer voice required structure; speaking order, grounding techniques.
- Language barriers made it essential to blend Somali and English, and rely on peer translators and culturally fluent facilitators.



Outcomes

- Women discovered vital community resources and found solace in forming connections among themselves.
- They felt HEARD - validated and understood.
- Resource sharing and trusted relationships were established between the community and our organization
- Created a foundation for future programming for Somali community based on this peer model



Lessons Learned

- Cultural responsiveness must be the foundation, not an add-on. Understanding norms, religion, and community values builds trust.
- Peer-led dialogue is powerful; youth were more open when learning from other Somali young women.
- Trauma-informed facilitation was essential; predictable structure, consent for every activity, and options for private sharing.
- Creating accessible pathways (childcare, familiar/friendly/accessible location, flexible scheduling, relevant/peer designed sessions) improves attendance and retention.
- The success demonstrated a significant unmet need for dedicated mental health supports tailored for Somali women.
- Staff from same community with linguistic and cultural expertise to establish community trust

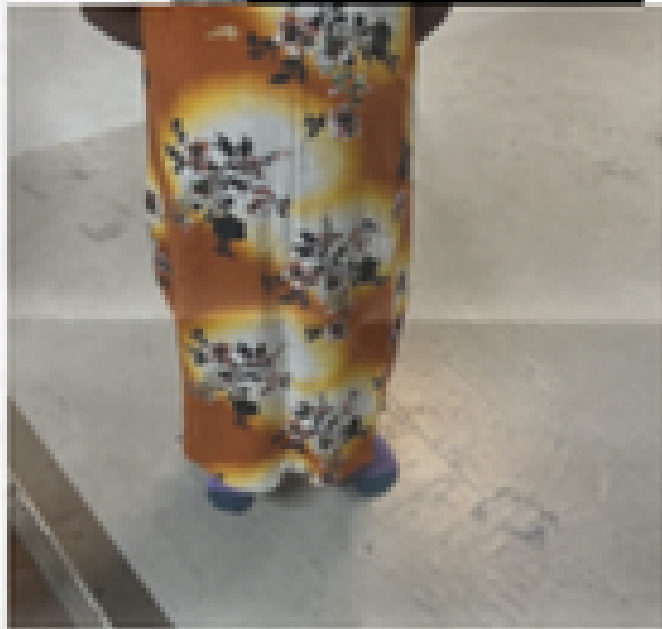
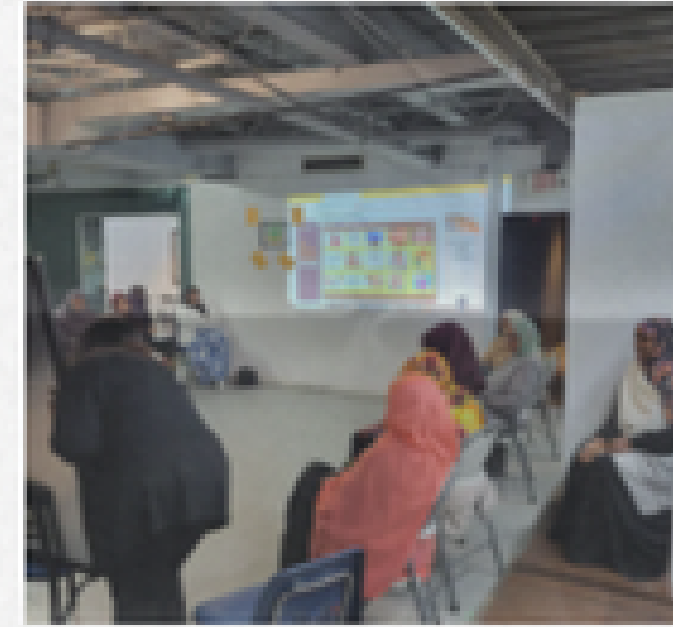


Next Steps

- Linguistically and culturally appropriate client mental health series for Afghan, Arabic, Somali and Hispanic communities
- Summer of Art Series for Filipino, Afghan, Arabic, Somali, South Asian and Chinese Groups
- Chinese & Somali Sewing Groups
- One on One mental health counselling for GBV survivors



Healing through Sewing



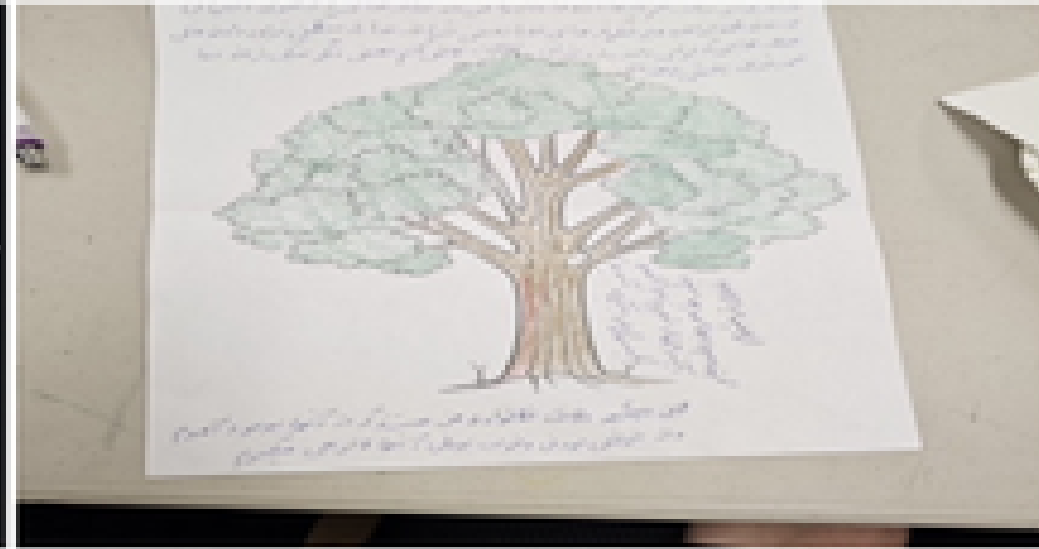
Healing through Baking Art



Healing through Floral Art



Afghan Mental Health Series



THANK
you

Group Activity



In small groups of 2-4 people, read through your scenario and discuss the following questions. We will then share back your ideas with the larger group:

1. What are the main challenges in the scenario you were provided?
2. What are some possible quick fixes or solutions that can be implemented right away?
3. What are the key take-aways or lessons learned? How would your agency do things differently when implementing a peer support group in the future?

Scenario 1



CLIENT
MENTAL
HEALTH

Your agency recently launched a peer support group for Somali newcomer women. The participants were recruited following recommendations from a focus group with Somali women, where many expressed interest in starting a peer group to build social connections and support their mental wellbeing. The peer support group meets on Thursday afternoons at the Somali Centre. Although there was strong initial interest, attendance has been low, typically only two or three participants attend each week. When you ask one of the clients why this might be, she explains that many women live far from the Centre, have childcare responsibilities in the afternoons, and lack access to reliable transportation. She also shares that several women have suggested adding a sewing component to the sessions, as this could make the group more engaging and practical while offering an opportunity to develop skills and potentially earn income.

Scenario 2



Your agency recently implemented a peer support group for international students. The peer support group meets virtually on Wednesday evenings. During the first meeting, you notice that most of the participants speak Tagalog, but two participants do not. It appears that some of the participants are only comfortable speaking Tagalog. The two non-Tagalog speaking participants don't return to the group, and the sessions continue in Tagalog only. After three weeks, participation has dropped significantly, with only two students remaining. You learn that it is exam season and that many students have to work in the evenings. You decide to recruit more participants and have five new students join the group. However, the dynamics have changed, and now that the group members don't know each other, you observe that there is not the same openness and comfort in discussions.

Scenario 3



CLIENT
MENTAL
HEALTH

Your agency initiated an English-speaking peer support group that started with two volunteer facilitators and eight participants. Due to an influx of asylum seekers needing support and information in your region, the peer support group size grows significantly. By week three, the second facilitator has dropped out of the program, and there are twenty group participants. You learn that many of the participants are staying in a local shelter, and through word of mouth, learned about this peer support group. Most participants express that they want help finding work and affordable housing. You observe that the facilitator is struggling to manage group dynamics and the discussions are not about mental health but are focused on addressing the practical aspects of settlement. The group facilitator expresses that she does not feel equipped to answer the participants' settlement-related questions.

THANK YOU!



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