

# Somatisation among Asian Refugees and Immigrants as a Culturally-shaped Illness Behaviour

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## Abstract

*Epidemiological studies indicate a high prevalence of major depression and anxiety disorder (including post-traumatic stress disorder) among Asian refugees and immigrants living in North America. Yet there exists an alarming underutilisation of mental health services and underdiagnosis of psychiatric illness in this rapidly growing minority group.*

*In order to investigate a culturally-derived basis for these observations, a critical review was conducted on descriptive epidemiologic, sociologic, and anthropologic studies of psychiatric illness among Asians and Asian refugees and immigrants reported in the general psychiatric and trans-cultural psychiatric literature of the past forty years.*

*Studies examining the mode of illness presentation among Asian refugees seeking medical care suggest a marked tendency to articulate somatic rather than affective complaints when serious underlying psychiatric conditions exist. In this context, somatisation among Asian refugees and immigrants may reflect culturally-shaped beliefs regarding notions of disease aetiology and treatment as well as what is deemed culturally-appropriate help-seeking behaviour during illness.*

*Misdiagnosis and underdiagnosis of psychiatric illness in this and other minority populations can be minimised by establishing pluralistic norms and multidimensional criteria which take into account the ethnically diverse manifestations of illness behaviour encountered increasingly in Western primary care and psychiatry clinics.*

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