

Supporting the mental health of immigrants

Globally, 3.6% of the population lives in a country they weren't born in.¹ They move for a variety of reasons. Some relocate for jobs or educational opportunities, or to join family abroad. Others are forced to leave due to conflict, natural disasters or persecution.

Some have the time and resources to go through the official immigration process. Others can't or don't.

Even if you're eager to move to a new place or start a new job, moving tends to bring stress and mixed emotions. It becomes even harder emotionally if you are made to feel unwelcome. Those who settle in new countries often face significant challenges that can contribute to mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Some existing residents may dislike or fear immigrants simply because they are from another place. This is called xenophobia. Immigrants may experience hate speech, discrimination, be taken advantage of or abused. In some areas, these challenges are getting worse, as xenophobia and racism continue to rise worldwide.² It can be a lot to cope with on your own, especially if you don't know where to turn for support or feel unsafe asking for help.

If you know someone in this situation who could use support, here are some ways to get started.



Understand your own potential impact

One of the best ways to help people feel included is to be self-aware. There are a lot of things we say, think and do automatically — and we may not realize why or how they affect others. Understanding who we are and where our perspectives come from can help us recognize how we may or may not be helping create an environment where others feel safe and welcome.

It's natural to have biases. Our brains create categories to make sense of the world. But the values we place on those categories are learned and can be unlearned with self-awareness and effort. For example, most people:

- Prefer those who are most like them
- Seek and favor information that supports their existing beliefs
- Make assumptions based on appearances and first impressions

Consider how these biases might influence your interactions with people new to your community and how you could course correct.

At the same time, think about what you take for granted that others may not. People have different customs and social norms. A simple example is how people greet one another. Do you nod, shake hands, hug or something else?

Before you say, do or assume something, remind yourself to keep an open mind about different perspectives and personal boundaries.

Know the signs

Mental health concerns present in different ways for different people. Some common signs of depression, anxiety or trauma include:

- Excessive worry or fear
- Persistent sadness, hopelessness or “empty” feeling
- Extreme mood changes, including irritability or anger
- Changes in eating habits, energy levels or sleep patterns
- Increased use of alcohol or other substances
- Persistent physical aches and pains
- Difficulty carrying out daily tasks or managing stress

It’s also important to note that people from different cultures may express distress differently. Languages may not have direct translations for certain terms, and people may describe their symptoms in different ways.

If you’re concerned about someone, encourage them to consult a medical or mental health provider or connect with a community organization that offers culturally responsive care.

You can also encourage them to practice self-care techniques. These include covering the basics, like eating nutritious foods, getting enough sleep, staying active, taking time to relax and nurturing social connections. Finding reasons to be hopeful and optimistic, even in small ways, can also make a difference during tough times.

Foster communication and understanding

Take steps to make it easier for people to understand you. For example, if someone isn’t fluent in your region’s language, speak more slowly. Use shorter words and sentences, as they are easier to follow. Avoid using slang words and local sayings or idiomatic expressions. If many newcomers in your area share a common language, try to learn at least a few phrases to help bridge the gap.

Similarly, help them understand local customs and why something is done a certain way. This could be something simple like needing a reusable bag for grocery shopping. It could also be something more critical like legal rights. For example, in many countries (including the United States, Canada, Germany and Japan), individuals have the right to remain silent and request an attorney before answering police questions.^{3,4,5,6} They can also refuse to let police or immigration enforcement officers into their home without an official warrant. Laws vary by location. Learning about local policies can help you guide others to know their rights.

In addition, consider the information you share online and in person. Be careful not to reinforce harmful stereotypes and spread false information. Research to make sure information is credible. If you can’t verify it, don’t spread it.



Openly show and provide support

Hold yourself and others accountable for fostering a welcoming environment. If you overhear or see something that threatens another person's sense of safety or belonging, address it.

Also, think about the challenges newcomers face. Depending on their past experiences, some may feel uneasy going out alone. You could offer to go with them to the grocery store, appointments or other places.

Learn about local resources for immigrants so you can help connect them to support when they need it. This might include resettlement agencies, community organizations, schools, universities and workplace programs.

Depending on your comfort level, availability and financial resources, you can donate to, volunteer with or speak up for organizations that help newcomers get settled safely. You can also advocate for immigrants by voicing your support, contacting policymakers and participating in organized events.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

1. International Organization for Migration. [Interactive World Migration Report 2024](#), 2024.
2. United Nations. [With hate speech and xenophobia rising worldwide, third committee calls for end to systemic racism, racial discrimination, implementation of Durban Declaration](#). Oct. 27, 2023.
3. ACLU. [Know your rights | Immigrants' rights](#).
4. Government of Canada. [Section 11\(c\) – Protection against testimonial compulsion](#). July 31, 2023.
5. Courts in Japan, [Questions and answers on criminal procedure](#).
6. Rotwang Law, [Defense rights & the role of criminal lawyers in Germany](#). Oct. 9, 2024.



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