

Engaging the Community and Assessing Their Mental Health Needs

About the Core Topic

Engaging the community and assessing their mental health needs are vital before selecting a new program or practice to implement. Engaging people from the target community in the needs assessment is essential. With their partnership, designing, providing, and evaluating programs and practices can better address needs. The needs assessment will identify: community mental health needs, strengths, and their underlying factors; existing mental health services and gaps; and solutions to address these needs.

Why This Topic Matters for Implementation

Engaging all parts of a target community and understanding their mental health needs are the first steps toward preparing, implementing, and sustaining effective mental health programs and practice.

Key Components

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Participation in assessing needs, planning, and implementing health interventions is a fundamental right for all,¹ and includes designing, providing, and evaluating mental health services within a community. Community mental health organizations and programs can begin by developing a strategic plan to guide the partnership process, paying attention to principles of community engagement such as co-learning/co-production, humility, relationship building, resource sharing, action and change, and sustainment.¹ Community engagement strategies around mental health services can include promoting awareness of and access to services, reducing stigma, optimizing community members' ability to participate, mapping community resources that can be leveraged for engagement, enacting culturally relevant strategies for engaging various communities in services, problem solving when engagement does not work, and addressing various barriers and enhancing facilitators to engagement.

References:

1. Powell, T., Subica, A. M., Gotham, H. J., Haegerich, T., Jordan, A., Kelly, J., Magidson, J., Sharma, S., Taxman, F. S., & Zimmerman, L. (2024). *The partner engagement guide: Meaningfully engaging and integrating partners into the research process*. Center for Dissemination and Implementation At Stanford (C-DIAS) and HEAL Data2Action Research Adoption Support Center (HD2A RASC).

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MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A mental health needs assessment ideally identifies and prioritizes community mental health strengths and needs, including data on the prevalence of mental health issues. Information about strengths, needs, and underlying factors (e.g., non-medical determinants of health) are gathered through multiple types of data from representative groups, following community engagement strategies. At the same time, information is gathered on existing community mental health services (resource mapping), including evidence-based and community defined evidence-based services.² Results of a mental health needs assessment can then lead toward selection of effective practices to address unmet needs and service gaps.³

How We Can Help

WHAT WE CAN DO

- Assist you in developing a plan to engage community partners in planning, implementing, and evaluating mental health services
- Assist you in developing a plan to assess the mental health needs and strengths in a community, state, or region, including mapping existing services
- Review an existing needs assessment and provide recommendations

SUPPORT WE HAVE PROVIDED

- We held a series of consultative meetings with a mental health organization to support them in identifying a new service to meet the needs of the community. The organization was assisted to plan a comprehensive needs assessment with input from a range of local interested parties.
- We provided a learning session on foundational principles of community engagement, including practical ways to build trusting relationships, sharing power with community, and assessing work through the ladder of engagement.
- We hosted a learning community on Community Engagement Across the Project Lifespan for mental health professionals. Across five interactive sessions, participants explored strategies for engaging stakeholders at every stage of a project—from planning to sustainability—while sharing experiences, challenges, and successes.

References:

2. National Center for School Mental Health. (2023). *School mental health quality guide: Needs assessment and resource mapping*. National Center for School Mental Health, University of Maryland School of Medicine.
3. Young, C., & Bell, A. (2024, October 16). *What makes a good mental health needs assessment?* Centre for Mental Health.

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Key Resources

These practical resources are designed to help you move from planning to action:

- [*The Partner Engagement Guide: Meaningfully Engaging and Integrating Partners into the Research Process.*](#) Center for Dissemination and Implementation At Stanford (C-DIAS) and HEAL Data2Action Research Adoption Support Center (HD2A RASC).
- [*Community Tool Box.*](#) Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas.
- [*Rural Community Health Toolkit - Module 1: Creating a Rural Community Health Program.*](#) Rural Health Information Hub.
- [*Community Engagement: A Health Promotion Guide for Universal Health Coverage in the Hands of the People.*](#) World Health Organization.
- [*What Makes a Good Mental Health Needs Assessment?*](#) Centre for Mental Health.
- [*Community Needs Assessment.*](#) National Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center.
- [*School Mental Health Quality Guide: Needs Assessment and Resource Mapping.*](#) National Center for School Mental Health, University of Maryland School of Medicine.
- [*Children's Mental Health Initiative \(CMHI\): Needs Assessment Template and Guidelines.*](#) National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Child, Youth, and Family Mental Health.

To view recorded learning sessions and online courses focused on community engagement and needs assessment and our other core topics, visit the [CMHIS Learning Lab](#).



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