

# Mental health stigma, fueled by religious belief, may prevent latinos from seeking help

April 1 2019

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Religious and cultural beliefs may discourage many Latinos in the United States from seeking treatment for depression and other mental health disorders, a Rutgers University-New Brunswick study finds.

Mental health providers and researchers should therefore engage with faith-based organizations and other community venues to help them address the stigma associated with mental illness and to encourage people to seek help, said Susan Caplan, an assistant professor at the Rutgers School of Nursing.

The study appears in the journal *Hispanic Health Care International*.

Latinos report experiencing mental health issues at about the same rates as white non-Hispanics in the United States, but they are only half as likely to seek treatment, largely due to stigma influenced by cultural and [religious views](#), according to the study.

"Religious faith is an important source of strength for people who experience stress and mental illness," Caplan said. "But beliefs that mental illness is caused by sin or a lack of faith or that it can be cured by prayer alone can discourage people from seeking help, add to their suffering and even contribute to suicide."

While she was developing a mental health literacy and engagement program for faith-based settings, Caplan surveyed Latin American members of three churches in the northeastern United States about the

ways their religious and cultural values influence their beliefs about mental illness.

Many respondents recalled growing up in communities where mentally ill people were ostracized and where families refused to talk about [mental illness](#) or even acknowledge it might exist within their family. Many expressed the belief that depression and other disorders were caused by a lack of faith or prayer, the influence of evil spirits or a parent's wrongful actions.

On the other hand, some recognized that attributing suicide to a lack of faith is stigmatizing and can prevent people with depression from seeking help. One pastor shared the story of a respected Christian and Native American leader who suffered from depression, felt unable to talk with anyone partly due to fears of discrimination, and committed suicide.

The study concluded that efforts to encourage Latin Americans' to get mental health treatment should begin with a deeper understanding of cultural and religious factors that may prevent them from getting help.

**More information:** Susan Caplan, Intersection of Cultural and Religious Beliefs About Mental Health: Latinos in the Faith-Based Setting, *Hispanic Health Care International* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1540415319828265](#)

Provided by Rutgers University

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