

Title: The role of family in the help-seeking experience of relatives suffering from severe mental illness in the Chinese community in England

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Abstract:

Background

Traditional Chinese societies emphasise collectivism and familial obligation to their family members. Studies in different Chinese societies showed that Chinese families often assumed that it was their responsibility to look after the 'unwell' in the family.

Aim

This paper aims to discuss the role of family in the help-seeking process of Chinese people suffering from severe mental illness (SMI) in England.

Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted to capture the complexity of help-seeking experience of Chinese people affected by SMI in England. 14 families with a relative suffering from SMI were interviewed. Family members interviewed included spouses, parents and cousins.

Findings

The study found that family could facilitate and hinder early contact with mental health services. Families also used spiritual healers and traditional Chinese medicine to look after their relatives' mental health. The direction and duration of help-seeking was affected by the support and advice given by the wider social network such as friends and work colleagues. Although all participants had a relatively long mental health history, repeated relapses did not necessarily lead to total rejection of relatives with mental illness as suggested by previous studies on overseas Chinese. Chinese people suffering from SMI still maintained close and regular contacts with their families. The family provided emotional support and practical support such as acting as interpreters and accompanying their mentally unwell relatives to attend medical appointments.

Conclusions

The findings revealed that although family plays a major part at different stages of help-seeking, support and advice given by other social connections could alter their help-seeking journey. Further study is needed to explore different ways to provide information about symptoms of mental illness and service provisions for the Chinese community so that timely and appropriate treatment can be provided.