

# Supporting Wellbeing and Mental Health Literacy in a Melbourne Chin Refugee Community

## Context

In 2021, Neami National was engaged by Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) to develop and facilitate two mental health workshops for young people in the Victorian Chin Baptist Church (VCBC) community.

Based in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, VCBC was established by a small group of Chin refugees in 2003 and has since grown into a community several hundred strong. The Chin people have been persecuted for their Christian faith in their motherland of Myanmar and most community members arrived in Australia on refugee visas.

The project team, led by MIC's Project Lead and bicultural staff, included clinical and non-clinical mental health practitioners from Neami National, and community development staff from Maroondah City Council, who were supporting the project.

MIC's Hakha Chin bicultural worker was instrumental in building the relationship between Neami and the broader Hakha Chin community. Consultation with community leaders was undertaken to explore the community's context, needs, and considerations to ensure culturally and spiritually safe outcomes. The VCBC Youth Pastor additionally consulted the community's young people and relayed their issues of concern to the project team; these included how to understand wellbeing and mental health, mental health diagnoses and the concept of recovery, suicide, mental health treatment and support options.

## The Workshops

### Goals

Workshop aims were to increase wellbeing and mental health literacy among the community; to strengthen the capacity of community members to support one another through wellbeing challenges; and to encourage community members to engage external services when further support was required.

The workshops were intended for a youth audience, which in the VCBC community included people in their 30s, while Neami staff typically ran youth programs for people up to the age of 25. It was agreed that community members between the ages of 16-35 years would be invited to attend.

### Neami's Approach

Staff from two Neami services – the Eastern Melbourne Psychosocial Support Service and LifeConnect suicide prevention service – developed two three-hour workshops to address priority topics identified in the consultations. They also encouraged the community to identify and draw on existing strengths and resilience factors.

Culturally appropriate terminology was discussed within the consultation phase. To demystify and destigmatise issues of mental health, the facilitators used plain and simple language, avoiding clinical language wherever possible.



Cultural and spiritual safety was considered in all aspects of the workshop design. This included acknowledging the role spirituality and faith-based practices can play in wellbeing and seeking the VCBC Youth Pastor's approval of visual imagery used on presentation slides prior to the workshops.

Neami staff recognised that diverse explanatory models of mental health and wellbeing are held among various communities. The facilitators acknowledged social determinants of mental health and the multifaceted nature of wellbeing, and conveyed experiences of mental ill health over diagnostic signifiers. This provided a framework to discuss common mental health challenges and diagnoses, as requested by the community, with a destigmatising approach. Community members were encouraged to reflect and discuss their own understandings of stress, wellbeing, and mental health.

## Facilitation

The workshops were co-facilitated by clinical, non-clinical and lived experience mental health practitioners. They included presentations, small group discussions and question time.

While the workshops were planned to take place at the VCBC church, due to fluctuating COVID-19 restrictions they were adapted at short notice and delivered online.

## Outcomes

- Feedback from participants was highly positive. The majority reported that they intended to share information from the workshops with their friends and family.
- Both workshops were well attended, and community members were engaged and active in all discussions.
- Following the workshops, translated mental health and self-care fact sheets were provided to the VCBC community leaders for distribution.
- Sophie McKenzie - Project Lead, Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC), provided the following reflection:

*'The real-life examples given by both presenters resonated strongly with the group. The simple, clear language suited the feeling that the group needed a basic understanding as this was confirmed through the smaller group discussions...Mental health is normally a difficult topic on which to engage participants, and especially so online, so it was a great achievement to have participants so engaged and interested in the workshop.'*

## Success Factors and Learnings

Neami's project team members acknowledge the complexity of working across cultures and discussing mental health, which may be heavily stigmatised in some communities. Several factors contributed to this project's success, including:

- Strength of stakeholder relationships – MIC's relationship with both Neami and the community was pivotal, countering the stigma sometimes experienced by multicultural communities that poses a significant barrier to accessing mainstream services.
- A shared approach of respectful curiosity and cultural reflexivity
- An iterative approach to the work, and openness to learning through the challenges and complexities of working with various multicultural communities.
- Adequate resourcing and time dedicated to consultation and seeking community leaders' feedback at multiple points.
- Cross-cultural communication and understanding supported by MIC's bicultural worker.
- Strength of relationship and trust between VCBC's Youth Pastor and community members supported high attendance and engagement levels.

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