

## Obstacles preventing Chinese immigrant students from seeking help from counselling, and tips for removing these obstacles

Candy Vong

### Introduction

In general, Chinese immigrant students have a low rate of self-referral to counselling services. This does not mean that they are free of problems or that they have a lower level of mental health issues than other groups of students. On the contrary, many Chinese immigrant students experience multiple stresses, which places them at risk of suffering from various psychological, emotional and personal difficulties. Some of these chronic stresses are homesickness, loneliness, change of environment, the uprooting process resulting from immigration, personal losses such as loss of friends and support systems, separation from family members, cultural conflicts, adjustment to a life in a foreign country, difficulty in adapting to a new education system and different teaching styles, and language problems. So why do Chinese students rarely come to see a counsellor for help when they are stressed? What obstacles may be present that may prevent them from seeking counselling? It is important for teachers and counsellors to understand the barriers that

hinder their willingness to seek counselling, in order to help Chinese students make better use of this service to address their needs. These obstacles will be explored and some important recommendations made for removing them. This paper will also include recommendations for developing counselling practices which are culturally appropriate for Chinese students.

### *Obstacle 1: Shame*

Student A: "I do not choose to see a counsellor, because my family don't like me to tell my problem to outsiders."

Chinese cultural values stress collective rather than individual identity. Much stress is placed on bringing honour to the family name and maintaining a good public reputation. Whatever a family member does as an individual reflects on the entire family. Thus, personal problems or behaviours such as failure in school, vocation problems, or psychological problems, may be perceived as bringing shame and dishonour to the family name. There is a Chinese saying: "Family disgrace should not be revealed to outsiders". As a result,

the family may exert great pressures on Chinese students to keep such things hidden from the public, and not to reveal personal matters to outsiders – particularly problems relating to family matters.

### **Obstacle 2: Stigma**

Student B: “I prefer not to go to counselling because my classmates may think that I am a saint or trouble-maker.”

Chinese are very sensitive to the stigma attached to having personal and emotional problems. For traditional Chinese, having a psychological problem is similar to being insane. Chinese students may also feel ashamed and disgraced when they need to admit emotional problems to outsiders, such as a counsellor, because of the social stigma attached to seeking help from mental health services.

### **Obstacle 3: Fears about the privacy and safety of information**

Student C: “I am not sure whether the counsellor will keep my secret. I am afraid that my private matter will be told to my classmates.”

There is no custom of keeping things private among Chinese people. In a family setting, which values closeness among members, individual boundaries are not emphasised and it is easy to share information among family members. Thus, there is always an assumption that personal feelings or thoughts revealed to the counsellor will be passed on to the

student’s family members. Moreover, the Chinese community is quite small in New Zealand, and gossip is a common problem among Chinese immigrants. Therefore, Chinese students commonly fear that private matters revealed to the counsellor will eventually be made known to other students or family members.

### **Obstacle 4: Culturally appropriate help-seeking patterns**

Student D: “I feel uneasy to talk about my personal issues to a stranger such as a counsellor.”

Chinese people often draw distinctions between social groups by identifying three categories: 1) family 2) close friends or peers, and 3) strangers. The Chinese cultural tradition is that personal problems are handled within the family context, rather than relying on outside resources. Thus, Chinese students often try out the primary circle of resource people first. They tend to go to the family, relatives, close friends or peers for help rather than to counsellors, who fall within the third category of strangers, no matter how expert they may be. If the preferred resource persons fail to help them or they have nowhere else to turn, students may consider seeking help from a professional. Migration may well involve loss of students’ original support systems, and thus lead them to seek help from a counsellor as the best alternative resource.

**Obstacle 5: Emotional restraints**

Student E: "It seems strange to me when I was asked to share my feelings in counselling."

The mainstream of traditional, Neo-Confucian Chinese teaching emphasises inhibition and moderation in terms of handling emotions. Chinese culture also emphasises maturity and wisdom, which are associated with one's ability to control emotions and feelings. Thus, Chinese people value restraint of strong feelings and subtlety in approaching problems. This value is contradictory to Western notions of counselling that encourage the client to be open in sharing their inner feelings. Disclosing one's feelings and inner thoughts to a counsellor can be seen as revealing insecurity and uneasiness to many Chinese students, especially males, and thus leads to their less frequent use of counselling.

**Obstacle 6: Lack of knowledge about counselling**

Student F: "I have no idea about counselling. This stops me from approaching a counsellor."

Counselling is a foreign term to Chinese students and their unfamiliarity with counselling services becomes another obstacle for them in seeking help from this source. They appear to be unclear as to how counselling works, how much help they can get from the counsellor and what the potential effectiveness of counselling can be. Their

unfamiliarity with counselling services may limit Chinese students' faith in talking about personal problems to counsellors and thus lower their willingness to come for counselling. Moreover, many Chinese students have no idea about the nature of counselling services, their location and when to use them. This further contributes to their under-utilisation of these services.

**Obstacle 7: Low expectation of benefit from counselling**

Student G: "I don't think counselling works for me."

Expectations regarding the probability of success in counselling may facilitate or hinder help-seeking. Yuen and Tinsley's (1980) study of expectancies about counselling on a university campus found that Chinese students expected less beneficial outcomes than American students. This low expectation of the probability of success in counselling may also contribute to students' resistance to seeking counselling.

**Obstacle 8: Lack of Chinese counsellors**

Student H: "The counsellor is not a Chinese. She probably will not understand me. So there is no point to see her."

The lack of counsellors from one's own ethnic group may lead students in minority groups such as the Chinese to think that a counsellor may not be able to relate to their experiences because of a lack of understanding about their

cultural backgrounds. Moreover, many Chinese students feel uneasy about expressing themselves in English because they may have language difficulties or they cannot express their feelings and experiences in another language very well. Thus, a lack of Chinese-speaking counsellors may lead students not to seek help from counselling to address their personal concerns.

### **Tips for school counsellors on helping Chinese students remove obstacles**

1. Confidentiality needs to be emphasised in promoting counselling services, in order to lessen the fear of bringing shame to self and family when seeing a counsellor. Moreover, counsellors need to ensure that confidentiality is strictly honoured in the process of counselling, in order to increase Chinese students' willingness to utilise this service and enhance their engagement in counselling.
2. Counsellors can develop preventive and educational programmes to reach out to Chinese students, because such programmes can lessen the stigma associated with using a counselling service. For example, Chinese students who are interested in learning skills that help the student to deal with stress often welcome stress management groups. These programmes can serve as a point of entry for Chinese students in understanding more about counselling services and in experiencing the benefits of counselling. This will increase their willingness to seek further help from counselling.
3. Counsellors can encourage senior Chinese students to participate in peer-support programmes to reach out and help younger Chinese students. The peer-support person can introduce the counselling service and encourage others to make use of this service. It is much easier for a Chinese student to come to a counsellor for help when a friend or peer-support person supports him or her. Thus, peer-support persons can serve as a bridge for Chinese students to approach the counselling services.
4. Since Chinese students may not be willing to seek counselling to address their personal and emotional problems, counsellors can put effort into advertising the availability of the services for helping them with vocational and academic concerns. Then, as they come to counselling to work with such concerns first and build up trust with the counsellor, this can serve as an entry to deal with more personal emotional and developmental issues.
5. Counsellors need to tailor their counselling style to suit the needs of Chinese students in order to increase their utilisation of counselling services. For example, instead of only focusing on verbalising and expressing feelings,

counsellors can try using somatic metaphors to help clients express their emotions. Using a problem-solving approach at the beginning is more likely to allow them to taste the benefits of counselling, and enhance their faith in its effectiveness.

6. A more diverse cultural environment can be created in the counselling area. A culturally sensitive arrangement, such as adding some Chinese decorations, can make Chinese students feel more comfortable with counselling.
7. Due to Chinese students' lack of knowledge about counselling and the location of its services, an emphasis on advertising counselling services is necessary. Information could include the following:
  - The purpose of counselling and how to make use of this service
  - Facilities and location
  - Personnel and the actual process of counselling
  - The referral system.

The above information can then be included as part of the orientation for newcomers and ongoing promotions for current students. Posters, booklets, pamphlets and videotapes are useful in promoting counselling services and in reaching out to Chinese students. These ways of promoting counselling services to Chinese students become more attractive and culturally sensitive if they can be written in Chinese. Moreover, questionnaires

- can be used as a method to educate students and inform them about counselling and how to access this service. If they are better informed about the nature and benefits of counselling and counselling is normalised as being a part of a student's support system, the Chinese student is then more likely to use counselling services.
8. When working with Chinese students, counsellors need to be aware of the possibility of low expectations in counselling. Counsellors can facilitate the counselling process by finding out how clients perceive the quality and success of counselling and clarify any misunderstanding that may interfere with the effectiveness of its process.

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