

Addiction Among Asian Americans, Editorial Staff, American Addiction Centers

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Gambling research shows that Asian Americans are more likely to have gambling problems than the general American population. Cultural factors supporting the belief in luck, fate or fortune encourage gambling. A strong sense of family privacy discourages seeking help when gambling becomes a problem.

While gambling is socially acceptable, losing control and having a problem may result in cultural shame, embarrassment and loss of respect in the community. It is important to understand that a gambling problem is not a moral issue but a significant mental health problem.

Gambling disorder is an addiction that affects many Asians, particularly of Vietnamese, Lao, Chinese, and Korean descent. According to the organization [National Asian and Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse](#) (NAPAFASA), problem gambling has had a destructive effect on many Asian American communities, and the gambling industry has worked actively to capitalize on this community's interest in wagering and betting. For Vietnamese, Chinese, and Koreans, casino games like black jack, roulette, and Pai Gow poker are especially alluring, while other groups favor video lotto, slot machines, sports betting, or traditional Asian games like mahjong.

Problem gambling, which can have a devastating effect on an individual's financial status as well as one's psychological and physical health. [NAPAFASA](#) points out that there may be a link between gambling disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder among Asian Americans, as one study showed that up to 60 percent of refugees and asylum seekers from Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia met the criteria for gambling addiction. Other motives for gambling disorder include a need to overcome a sense of isolation and loss, and a need to relieve the stress associated with immigration and acculturation.

Still other Asian Americans say that gambling is a way to gain recognition in a community that values performance and achievement. To win a game in front of one's peers brings a certain status, as well as the potential to earn money. Gambling is a social activity as well as a form of recreation and winning provides the opportunity to be respected and admired by other members of the community. Unfortunately, losing bets or wagers can have the opposite effect, with many individuals losing thousands of dollars in the span of a single night.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder caused by exposure to shocking or life-threatening events, is more common in Southeast Asian immigrants than in the general population, according to J. Chu and S. Sue. In an article published in [Online Readings in Psychology and Culture](#), the authors report that the rate of major depression and PTSD in Cambodian refugees is as high as 62 percent. In spite of the severity of their psychiatric symptoms, Asians with serious mental illness may be hesitant to use available mental health services because of language barriers, negative cultural perceptions of mental illness, and fear of social discrimination.

Although the rates of mental illness among Asian Americans are similar to those of the general US population, Asian Americans are significantly less likely to use professional mental health services or to delay treatment until their symptoms have become unmanageable. Within the Asian American community, conditions affecting the individual's mental health and substance use are often not openly discussed, and rehab services are often underutilized.

Some of the reasons for this underutilization include:

- Language barriers
- Social taboos against addiction
- Lack of education about available resources
- Lack of cultural or familial support for rehab

Mental illness and substance abuse are often viewed as a source of shame or disgrace in Asian American groups, and they are either addressed privately or denied altogether. Family pressures to maintain a successful image and racial discrimination against Asian minorities are two of the other most common obstacles to seeking help. When translation services and culturally sensitive treatment services are available, however, participation in recovery programs tends to increase, according to the article referenced above.

When Asian Americans do reach out for help, they are more likely to turn to their immediate relatives or to close friends from their own community than to consult a mental health professional. They may prefer to use self-help services or to seek assistance from holistic practitioners of Asian medicine before they turn to Western psychiatric specialists. When they do consult a psychiatrist or therapist, symptoms have usually become severe. Approximately a third of Asian American patients drop out of treatment before completing a course of therapy, according to the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Treatment Needs and Solutions

Providing effective treatment for substance abuse and mental illness in Asian Americans starts with culturally appropriate screening tools and assessment measures. Asian Americans express emotional distress differently than Whites, Hispanics, or African Americans, and mental illness is more likely to manifest itself through physical symptoms than psychological changes, according to *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*. Asian Americans may not reveal signs of depression, substance abuse, or suicidal ideation in standard screening tests, and they may prefer to disclose their symptoms directly to interviewing therapists or psychologists who are trained in culturally sensitive assessment.

Within nearly all Asian American subgroups, family is one of the most influential factors in determining personal choices and behaviors. Individuals seeking treatment for drug or alcohol abuse need the support and affirmation of their parents, siblings, and other close relatives in order to feel validated in their search for recovery and to achieve the greatest possible benefits from treatment. For this reason, family involvement should be considered one of the top priorities for substance abuse treatment in

culturally sensitive rehab programs for Asian Americans, according to the *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse*.

In addition to acknowledging the role of the family in recovery, rehab providers must include bilingual programs in order to make these services widely available. Treatment should acknowledge the cognitive patterns, cultural practices, and religious beliefs of the client's native ethnic group, such as the need for strong family engagement and the involvement of traditional Asian healers. Finally, substance abuse treatment must be integrated with mental health care and psychosocial services in order to address any underlying mental illness or unmet social needs that might interfere with the course of rehab and recovery.

Resources

- [American Psychological Association: Mental Health Among Asian-Americans](#): APA offers this discussion of the need for mental health services among Asian Americans, as well as the cultural and personal obstacles that discourage members of this group from seeking professional help.
- [Asian American Drug Abuse Program \(AADAP\)](#): This nonprofit program is devoted to the prevention and treatment of substance abuse among Asian Americans in Los Angeles County. AADAP offers services, such as multilingual counseling, education, community outreach, and rehabilitation in Southern California.
- [Asian American Health: Behavioral and Mental Health Issues](#): Sponsored by the National Library of Medicine, this portal site provides links to a variety of resources on substance abuse and recovery in the Asian American community.
- [Asian Americans for Community Involvement \(AACI\)](#): This public health organization is dedicated to serving the psychosocial needs of Asian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area. Mental healthcare, substance abuse treatment, and trauma counseling are provided, as well as housing, advocacy, and crisis intervention services.
- [Asian Americans for Equality \(AAFE\)](#): Based in New York City, which is home to one of the nation's highest concentrations of Asian immigrants, AAFE is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing assistance and support for a wide range of issues, from housing needs and social advocacy to financing for small businesses and the arts.
- [Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling: Asian Outreach Services](#): This organization offers educational materials, support, and three telephone helplines (in English, Chinese, and Vietnamese) to address the needs of members of the Asian community who are affected by compulsive gambling.
- [National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse \(NAPAFASA\)](#): A private, nonprofit organization that promotes prevention, education, and support for Asian Americans and their families whose lives have been affected by substance abuse.