

# PACIFIC RESEARCH AND POLICY CENTRE

## PACIFIC KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH HUB

## Pasifika understandings of mental illness in New Zealand

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*Pacific people in New Zealand suffer from high rates of mental illness compared to the general population, yet do not tend to utilise mental health services. Recent research by Massey University's Dr Sione Vaka explores Tongan perceptions of mental illness and how mental health providers can adequately meet the needs of Tongan, as well as other Pacific people.*

### **Tongan interpretations of mental health**

The over-representation of Tongan people in the mental health system in New Zealand raises questions about what Tongan people know and understand about accessing mental health services. Confusion can arise when discussing diagnoses of mental health, as Tongan cultural and spiritual beliefs around mental illness can differ widely from Western medical definitions. A lack of knowledge and understanding within the mental health service about Tongan, and other Pasifika, interpretations of mental illness can have problematic consequences for effective therapeutic treatment.

### **Rationale for research**

The government's current mental health strategy aims to ensure all New Zealanders have access to quality mental health services, and are able to make informed decisions that promote their wellbeing and recovery. The *Te Rau Hinengaro* mental health survey (2006) found that Pacific people suffer from higher rates of mental illness (25%) compared to the general population (20%) and tend not to access mental services (25% compared to 58%). Therefore, it is important to understand how Tongans and other Pacific people perceive mental illness in order to ensure good mental health outcomes for all.

### **Policy recommendations**

For the Ministry of Health, health providers, and all other relevant stakeholders to incorporate Pasifika interpretations of mental illness into health policy, practice and curricula to ensure good health outcomes for all Pacific people. This includes engaging with and informing mental health workers on how they can integrate social and spiritual aspects into their practice with Pacific people; and reviewing the cultural capability and capacity of health services to meet the mental health needs of Pacific people.

*"There are many interpretations among the Tongan community of mental illness ... addressing these holistically is very important". (Dr Vaka)*

For more information go to the [PRPC website](#) or contact [Litea Meo-Sewabu](#).

### **Key Points:**

- Pacific people in New Zealand experience high rates of mental illness and tend not to access mental health services
- Tongan interpretations of mental illness can differ widely from Western definitions and cause confusion and problems in diagnosis and care
- Tongan and other Pacific people's perceptions of mental illness should be incorporated into health policy and practice to ensure good mental health outcomes for all Pacific people