

# Mental health in Russian-speaking and Eastern European families: understanding the barriers

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## 6 factors that shape mental health help-seeking in Eastern European families

### 1 Mental illness has historically carried shame in post-Soviet culture

The Soviet psychiatric system was used as a tool of social control. Receiving a psychiatric label could mean job loss, loss of rights, and social stigma. This history created a deep distrust of mental health systems that persists across generations.

### 2 The expectation that problems stay within the family

In many Eastern European families, discussing personal or family difficulties with an outsider, even a professional, feels like a betrayal or a sign of failure. Therapy requires precisely this kind of disclosure.

### 3 Generational messaging: 'we survived worse'

Parents and grandparents who lived through historical hardship often dismiss psychological distress as insufficient reason for professional help. The comparison, real hardship vs. psychological pain, undermines the legitimacy of seeking support.

### 4 Language and finding culturally-aware therapists

Accessing a therapist who speaks Russian or understands Eastern European cultural context removes significant barriers. The ability to express yourself in your first language, and to not have to explain cultural context, matters enormously in therapy.

### 5 What is changing in younger generations

Adults raised in Canada who grew up between two cultures are often more open to therapy. They understand the Western mental health framework while still navigating family expectations. They are often the bridge generation.

### 6 Online therapy as a practical privacy solution

For community members concerned about being seen entering a therapy office, online sessions remove that exposure. Many Russian-speaking Ontarians begin therapy online for exactly this reason.

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