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Ethnic identity expressed in clothing is good for adolescents' mental health

[Cultural identity, clothing and common mental disorder: a prospective school based study of white British and Bangladeshi adolescents *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2008; 62: 435–41]

Young people who dress according to the customs of their own ethnic group are less likely to have subsequent mental health problems than those who don't, suggests research in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

The findings are based on just under 1000 white British and Bangladeshi 11 to 14 year olds in East London schools, where levels of population diversity are among the highest in the UK.

In 2001 the pupils were quizzed about their culture, social life, and health. They were surveyed again two years later, focusing on their mental health.

The findings showed that having friends from their own and other cultures (integrated friendships) or only having friends from their own culture made no difference to mental health.

But clothing choices did.

Bangladeshi pupils who wore traditional clothing were significantly less likely to have mental health problems than those whose style of dress was a mix of traditional and white British/North American tastes.

When this was broken down by gender, this only held true for the girls.

But white British pupils who chose to wear a mix of clothes from their own and other cultures enjoyed relatively good mental health.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, say the authors, and their identity is often bound up in clothing and friendship choices.

Cultural integration is the healthiest option for young people living in a multicultural society, but pressures to change lifestyle, attitudes, or behaviours can be very stressful, they say.

But retaining cultural identity through clothing may be important for good mental health, they conclude.