Cultural Competence

What is cultural competence
Cultural competence is the ability to effectively communicate with people of different cultures, and to embrace cultural diversity among those with whom you interact. Understanding the terms ‘culture’ and ‘diversity’ are key to an understanding of cultural competence.

Culture
Culture is a way of life. It is the knowledge, beliefs, and values of an ethnic or religious group, nationality group, or social group. Culture guides the groups' thoughts, decisions, and actions. The customs of each culture are learned and passed from one generation to another.

Diversity
Diversity is variety. It is the human qualities that are different from our own and the groups to which we belong but are present in other individuals and groups. Diversity can be divided into two sub-categories:

- The primary category includes things that we cannot change such as age, ethnicity, physical abilities, race, and sexual orientation.
- The secondary category includes things that can be changed such as educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, military experience, parental status, religious beliefs, and work experiences.

Cultural diversity
Cultural diversity refers to the differences between cultural groups and within cultural groups. For example, diversity within the Asian-American culture includes Korean Americans and Japanese Americans.

Cultural differences can be found throughout our country. For example: the popular sandwich made from a small bread roll and filled with a variety of meat, cheeses, and vegetables might be called a sub, submarine, poor boy, hoagie, grinder or foot-long depending on which area of the country you are in.

The influence of culture on behavior
All cultural groups have certain customs, normal behaviors, beliefs, superstitions, and language that guide how they:

- Live
- Make decisions
- Face a crisis
- Communicate
- Structure their society
- Prepare food and eat
- Celebrate holidays
- Dress.

The extent to which someone's cultural background influences their behavior is dependent on factors such as:

- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Class
- Education
- Status within the family
Examples of how culture influences behavior are:

- A Russian woman who has only been in the United States for a month and does not yet understand English will behave differently than a Russian woman who was born and raised in the United States even if she were raised learning Russian customs and language.
- People of all cultures have a "comfort zone" that determines how close they allow someone they don't know well to stand next to them. If someone gets too close, they feel uncomfortable. Cultures such as those in South American countries have a "small" comfort zone. If someone whose culture has a "wide" comfort zone meets with someone from South America who stands too close, the behavior of the South American may be incorrectly interpreted as being aggressive.

Prejudice and stereotyping
The United States is a country of very diverse cultures. Its citizens come from 120 different countries with many different languages, religions, and customs. Not understanding how culture affects the way people act often results in prejudice and stereotyping.

**Prejudice** is a premature judgment; a positive or negative attitude or opinion about a person or group that is not based on facts. Prejudices may also result from an emotional experience with a person from a similar culture or group. A person who thinks or says, "I don't want Hispanics living in my neighborhood," is expressing a prejudice.

Prejudices are usually based on **stereotypes** which are over-simplified and over-generalized views about individuals or groups of people who belong to a different religion, race, nationality, or other group. They involve strong feelings that are difficult to change. Stereotypes also provide us with role expectations such as how we expect the other person or group to relate to us and other people. It is important NOT to over-generalize the characteristics of a culture and use them to label an individual within that cultural group.

Examples of stereotypes in our culture are:

- "Leaders are dominant, arrogant men"
- "Housewives are nice but empty-headed"
- "Teenagers are music-crazed, car fanatics"
- "Very smart people are weird."

Cultural Diversity in Health Care

**Culturally diverse patient behaviors**
In health care, it is important to understand the impact that cultural background may have on a patient.

Patient behaviors that indicate cultural diversity include:

- How a patient or family member views healthcare
- The patient's health beliefs such as old wives tales, herbal remedies, or healers
- Eating behaviors such as what a patient will eat or what is taboo
- Treatment decisions (for example, some religious groups do not allow blood transfusions)
- Interactions with those in authority (for example, a patient who accepts everything he or she is told by someone perceived as an authority figure, without asking questions)
Family roles (for example, a husband who does all the communicating for his wife)
Beliefs and rituals related to life events including illness, birth, or death
Display of emotions, which may vary from very demonstrative to very reserved
Language.

Cultural diversity among healthcare workers
Cultural diversity is evident in co-workers as well as patients. When you don't know or understand the cultural background of a patient or co-worker, you may misunderstand and misinterpret his or her body language or behavior.

Examples of cultural beliefs that may be related to the work of health care professionals are listed below:

- Many Asian cultures believe it is disrespectful to look someone in the eyes while speaking. However, in African cultures, failing to look a person in the eye is considered a sign of not being honest.
- The Arab culture prefers to buffer bad news to boost the spirits of the ill person.
- In some religions, it is important to include the elders of the church in any decisions that need to be made.
- Some cultures and religions oppose routine vaccinations and immunization or other kinds of treatment.
- Family involvement is very important in some cultures. African-Americans, Amish, Arabs, Asians, and Mormons tend to have large, close-knit families. Make allowances for families to spend the night and to be with the patient as much as possible.
- Those of the Islamic faith may wish to have privacy to pray five times per day. If this is important for your patient, try to incorporate these times into his or her care so that privacy can be arranged.
- There may be some articles of clothing, religious medals, holy pictures, icons or other objects that are important to a patient. Whenever possible, allow him or her to keep these at the bedside.

Responding to cultural diversity
The actions of your patients, their families or your co-workers that you do not understand may be related to cultural beliefs or practice. It is important to be aware of the different cultural groups that may be represented at your facility among both staff and patients.

You will be better able to respond to culturally diverse patients and staff if you do the following:

- Learn about basic cultural beliefs, the patterns related to them, and how they impact health care. Learning about them will help you understand the behavior and support both the patient and his or her family but does NOT mean that you have to endorse the beliefs.
- Include questions about culture and religion into initial assessments.
- Remember to be sensitive to cultural needs and try to incorporate them into the patient's care.
- Learn a few important words or phrases from the languages of co-workers and patients you care for frequently.
- Use resources such as interpreters that are available in your facility to overcome language barriers.
- Remember that patients have the right to refuse treatment. Your job is to ensure that they are informed and that they understand potential risks involved.

End of Cultural Competence Lesson