Cultural awareness . . . Humility . . . Competency - Let the journey begin!

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Let the journey begin!

- "Culture is a mediator between human beings and chaos, guiding our interactions with each other." Julie Lipson ~ UCSF

The road to cultural competence begins with “aha” moments of discovery. We suddenly and unexpectedly grasp an understanding of our culture—beliefs, values, and biases—and the ways it guides our interactions, influences our decisions, and reveals itself to others. It is during those moments that we realize our differences from and similarities to our clients and colleagues. Our willingness to meet and honor those who may be different from us is the beginning of cultural competence. Stops along the way open the door to finding common ground, understanding, and respect.

Culture ~ First Stop

Culture – we all have it. It is how we reveal ourselves. We may not realize its influence because it is so embedded that we take it for granted. However, others may see us differently. Why? Because they view us through their cultural lenses. For those of us working with multi-ethnic communities this could pose a significant dilemma, as our culture may be different from theirs. So how do we bridge this potential barrier? Initially we can start with the understanding that each of us has a culture.

Culture can be defined as beliefs and values passed down from one generation to the next that we hold to be true. Think back to your family of origin. What were the important values and beliefs in your family? Were they values such as respect, hard work, a good education, and always telling the
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truth? How were decisions made? What were the views on education and economics? How did religion influence your family’s healthcare practices?

Now, what happens when your list doesn’t match that of your client or your colleague? Conflict? Misunderstanding? Maybe. We do well not to take it personally, but rather to understand that each person is seeing through his or her cultural filters. The following exercise is an opportunity to discover your cultural values and beliefs.

Reflective exercise: Cultural beliefs and values

1. List two beliefs you learned as a child.
2. Who did you learn them from?
3. Are they still important to you today?
4. Have you experienced conflict when your values/beliefs did not match those of another?
5. Where do you find common ground with clients and colleagues?

Were you surprised by your response? These values and beliefs are unique to “our story.” They are what we rely on in times of uncertainty. Julie Lipson (1996), researcher and educator, captures this thought in her definition of culture. For her, it is “the mediator between human beings and chaos, guiding our interactions with each other” (p. 1). As those of us in the field know, healthcare settings can be stressful and may seem chaotic at times, yet our cultural practices help us to manage the situation. Our culture provides the confidence and support.

Next Stop ~ Cultural Awareness

This next step in the journey to cultural competence begins with cultural awareness: an opportunity to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept one’s cultural values, beliefs, and unfortunately, biases. These biases, learned as a child and held to be true, can now be re-examined and changed. These “aha” moments of discovery broaden our world view and help us to find common ground with clients and colleagues. Differences, once considered barriers, now give way to bridges of understanding and respect. Think about
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people and groups that are not part of your every day. Are there biases or assumptions you have about them

**Reflective exercise: ~ Cultural Awareness**

1. *In which ethnic group, religious group, or generational group do you belong?*

2. *Reflect on some encounter you have had with those who are members of a different group.*

3. *How did it feel?*

4. *Did you experience any biases or prejudices?*

When we encounter people different from ourselves, we have the opportunity to gain an insight into their world. The more opportunities we pursue, the more enlightened we become. Cultural awareness education seminars, field trips, panel discussions, language immersion programs, and case presentations are venues that help to increase cultural awareness. Wade Davis, ethnobiologist, said it well. “The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you: they are unique manifestations of the human spirit.” It may seem a little humbling to read this quote, but it does open us to diversity. Cultural humility, the next step on the journey, challenges us to pause, reflect, and be open to another’s perspective.

**We’re getting there ~ the next stop ~ Cultural Humility**

What is cultural humility? According to Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, who first coined the phrase, it is “an ongoing process of self reflection and self critique, a way of being aware of our relationship with others and ourselves” (1997 p.117). It is not static. Cultural humility encourages us not only to recognize and acknowledge our biased assumptions, but to take responsibility for our actions and interactions with others. It calls us to identify power inequities that may exist between us and our clients. Once recognized, how do we deal with the inequity?

Awareness brings about humility, which brings about further awareness, and ultimately, a change in the way we approach each encounter. Seeing
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through the eyes of another helps us to discover common ground, enabling us to develop respectful partnerships that are client centered. We are now ready for the final stage of the journey, cultural competence.

Reflective exercise: You are admitting an elderly, limited English speaking woman to your Medical Unit. She is alone. She has few teeth, wears mismatched clothes and smells badly.

1. What are your immediate thoughts?
2. Name one or more biases that spontaneously come to mind.
3. Understanding the concept of cultural humility – how would your approach her?

The Final Stage ~ Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is an ongoing process. It begins with an inner desire to know more about other cultures and a willingness to encounter the uncomfortable. Cultural knowledge is acquired with each encounter and every discussion. It summons us to think outside of our “cultural world.” Gaining awareness, knowledge, and skill leads to heightened cultural sensitivity and competence. Are you ready?

Our Journey . . . Putting it into practice

Cultural assessments help to ensure quality care when included with the physical and psychosocial components. In order to provide a cultural assessment, three elements are necessary. First, we must be aware of our cultural beliefs, values, biases, and healthcare practices; second, we must have the knowledge of various ethnic groups; and third, we must have the practical skills necessary to complete a cultural assessment.

Reflective exercise: Cultural competence

1. What is motivating me to become culturally competent?
2. What do I want/need to know about other cultures . . . and where do I find this information?
3. When I experience cultural encounters, how does it feel and what do I learn?
4. Whom do I consider a “cultural resource person” in my life?
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In this section we review each of the elements in the author’s model, Reflections from Common Ground (Figure 8-1). This model provides you with an opportunity to discover your culture and identify similarities and differences with clients and colleagues. Herein you will find common ground that lays the foundation for providing culturally sensitive and competent care. As you review each element, ask yourself, “How am I the same or different from my client, and where do I find common ground?”

![Reflections from Common Ground Diagram](image)

**Our Words . . . Our ways of Communicating**

Communication, verbal and nonverbal, is an expression of ourselves – how we reveal ourselves to others. It is our response to encounters with life. Think about your style of communication as you read and reflect on the following: