Cultural Considerations Guide
for Certified Instructors delivering Mental Health First Aid & Youth Mental Health First Aid Training

Use this guide as part of the Mental Health First Aid or Youth Mental Health First Aid training

It prepares you to:

- See how culture impacts mental health and substance use challenges
- Build skills to improve cultural awareness
- Use culturally relevant communication strategies in your training

To best meet the mental health needs of others, we must consider culture. This helps us to understand and serve others in ways that work for them.

Purpose: To supplement the Mental Health First Aid and Youth Mental Health First Aid curriculum with information about culture and its impact on mental health and substance use challenges. Since we serve a diverse population in the United States, it is important that we are able to understand and speak to people from various cultures in a way that will resonate with them. This guide will assist instructors to provide training that is founded on an understanding of how culture influences our approach to accessing and using mental health services.

We acknowledge that this is an initial step in learning to “work with” culture and is by no means an in-depth education. The guide includes the definition of culture, population trends, health disparities, how and why culture impacts mental health, cultural self-awareness and how this impacts our work with others, and specific strategies to use when working with diverse people.
About the Authors and Acknowledgements

Change Matrix LLC (CM) is a women-owned, minority-owned, small business that works to motivate, manage, and measure change. Suganya Sockalingam, Rachele Espiritu and Elizabeth Waetzig are founding partners of CM and authors of this document. The authors are grateful for the research, editing and design contributions of Naomi Ortega Tein, Melissa Barone, and Sara Nelson.

The National Council would also like to acknowledge the many instructors that served as reviewers to contribute to the development of this document.
What is culture?

When we know about others’ cultures, we better understand their way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Culture is complex. It’s many things, like values, norms, expectations, and identity. It effect how we:

- See the world
- Live our lives
- Connect with others
- Organize our home and communities

Cultural shifts

When there are shifts in population, there are also shifts in the ways people view health and health care. Culture is at the center of all of this.

The United States is a very culturally diverse country with a great need for culturally competent care in health services. About 1/3 of our population is of a multicultural background and includes people who are of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American descent (amongst many others). There are more than 350 languages currently spoken in the US, and about one in five people have a native language other than English.

In 30 years, the racial and ethnic mix in the US will look quite different from how it does today. For example, in 2050 the Latino and Asian populations will be larger than they are today and there will also be more people in the US who are foreign born.

These shifts will continue to expand the cultural make-up of the US. This, in turn, affect how people view health and wellness and also how we need to provide care for them.

Always Keep Culture in Mind

Culture includes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Social groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Sexual identity</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Culture is fluid. People can belong to many cultures throughout their lives.
The influence of culture on health

Cultural beliefs influence our health decisions each day, every day. The more we keep this in mind, the better we can address mental health and addictions.

**Culture effects what we think about health**

The diagram to the right details 6 ways that culture impacts our health.

**Culture effects the way we treat health**

Different cultures have different norms (ideas about what’s typical) about health. These norms impact what people think about mental health and how they treat it.

For example, talking about emotions is ok and encouraged in some cultures. In others, it’s not.

In some cultures, mental health isn’t separated from physical health. These cultures often treat together the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. People may rely upon traditional healing for care through things like herbs, cupping, coining, and cleansing the spirit/soul. They may not believe in using prescription medications for mental health. Physical symptoms can show up when people aren’t able to discuss mental health.

**Cultural differences = Health differences**

When cultural respect and understanding aren’t part of health care, disparities arise.

A health disparity happens when health and health care are not equal across groups of people. This leads to different outcomes for different groups (good health for some and poor health for others).

Disparities can be seen in race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, age, location, gender, gender identity, disability status, and sexual orientation.

**Examples**

Health disparities occur because of the different ways people can/can’t access health care and use available services.

Some individual factors that affect health:
- Isolated from a supportive community
- Unfamiliar with US health system

Some outside factors that affect health:
- Cost of health care
- Getting health insurance
- Limited transportation
- No US citizenship
- Health information isn’t clear
- Communication barriers
- Hours of operation aren’t convenient
- Systems are complicated
- Services don’t meet cultural needs
- Structural bias and discrimination in services
- Providers not trained to consider culture
**Effects on mental health**

People of different cultures share many of the same mental health challenges. However, racially and ethnically diverse groups have certain ones at higher rates. Some of the more common challenges include stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

Mental health issues can build up when people are part of multiple diverse cultures. For example, someone who is experiencing poverty and identifies as a transgender female of color, may be more challenged and have more stress than someone who is only a member of one of those groups. However, at the same time, being part of cultural groups also offers protection and improves health and wellness.

**What can you do?**

People and their mental health aren’t separate from their culture. They all should be explored together.

One way to stop health disparities is to provide culturally responsive services. This helps improve health in underserved and poorly served communities. It also helps lower healthcare costs.

---

**Explore**

What are your own cultural biases? Exploring this is a great way to understand the culture of others.

To learn more check out these projects:

◊ Project Implicit
◊ Perception Institute

---

**What can lead to stress, anxiety, and more?**

- Adopting a new culture
- Being poor
- Discrimination
- Forced to leave your own culture
- Struggling with accepting your race

**Question**

◊ How would you learn about someone’s symptoms in a culturally responsive way?

◊ How would you ask questions that consider both Western and traditional practices?

◊ How would you figure out if a person has experienced trauma due to their cultural identity?
Build Your Skills

As an instructor, you play a key role in creating a safe space for others to explore culture and mental health or substance use challenges. This includes teaching participants how to be respectful and responsive to others’:

- Health beliefs and practices
- Cultural and language needs

In order to train others to do this, first think about your own cultural competency. Use the self-assessment form below to do this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1. I’m Aware of and Acknowledge Cultural Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I’m aware of the multiple worldviews of my participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I plan to learn about the worldviews of my participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I understand how different worldviews might lead to different interpretations (even if people experience the same event).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I’m able to help participants understand different views and assumptions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2. I Understand my Own Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I can explain my own cultural identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I understand how my worldviews about culture can lead me to make assumptions about others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3. I Know My Skills and Areas of Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I’ve thought about the ways I’m already culturally aware.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I’ve thought about the ways I can grow more culturally aware.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I’ve thought about how to use my strengths to meet the cultural needs of others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4. I Know Where to Learn More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I know where and how to learn more about different cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I know where to learn more about how different cultures communicate (verbally and non-verbally).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I know how to use what I learn when I train others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5. I Understand How Behavior Goes Hand-in-Hand with Culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I view people’s behavior as going hand-in-hand with their culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I can help participants to explore this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I can help participants make a connection between culture, behavior, and mental health.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies for Mental Health First Aid

General strategies

To be culturally responsive, find out what people value and prefer, learn how they communicate, and share information in the language they use.

Be careful about assumptions

We often group cultures together by commonalities. However, it’s important to not assume that just because one or two people from a group are one way that everyone else from that cultural group is the same. Test your assumptions by learning more about:

- An individual’s cultural beliefs and values
- How these beliefs have influence who they are

Areas to explore:

- How involved they want their family to be in their mental health decisions.
  For example, say you’re helping someone from X culture. Be careful not to assume that just because she’s from X culture that she’d want or not want to talk with someone in her family first before getting help. For some people from this culture it might be really important to, for example, talk with a family elder first. For others, it wouldn’t. Her aunt might prefer to do this whereas younger generations might not. The bottom line is, ask people what they prefer instead of assuming.

- Their care preferences.
  For example, some people may want spiritual leaders and indigenous healers to provide care while others may not. These and other types of care have been shown to improve health and well-being. They should be recognized as valid options. Often the best approach is to find out what treatment mix (traditional, Western, etc.) people want.

Question

◊ Take a moment to answer the questions in the Values Continuum Assessment. Do any of the questions stand out as being something that has influence your life? If so, has it influenced how you view mental health?

◊ How would you find out if someone wants traditional healing as part of their care?
A good way to learn about yourself and others is to consider values and preferences. Where on each line do you fall?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who or what controls health?</th>
<th>Fate does ▶ Individual does</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How are things run in the family?</td>
<td>Everyone has equal power ▶ Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the family, priority is placed on:</td>
<td>The individual ▶ The group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Around family authority figures, things are:</td>
<td>Informal ▶ Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals in the family tend to:</td>
<td>Stay with tradition ▶ Move away from tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which is most important?</td>
<td>Present ▶ Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having goals ▶ Simply being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperation ▶ Competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Material things ▶ Spirituality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Understand how people communicate**

Be aware of the different ways people communicate across cultures. This includes:

- Verbal and non-verbal communication
- If and how they express emotions
- Eye contact
- Body language
- How much physical space they need
- If they pause when speaking
- If the way they talk has a certain rhythm
- If they can talk about their feelings in a direct way

If you’re working with cultures that don’t openly express their feelings, it’s helpful to say things like “one might feel ...” instead of asking “How do you feel?”. This allows people to still share what’s going on but in a more general way.

**Provide information in the language people prefer**

An aspect to consider when training is the cultural background of your trainee participants. Be sure to thoroughly define all key concepts and words upfront to ensure that everyone has the same understanding. Always pause for questions, and never assume that all participants have the same definitions. Remember that culture also includes occupational background. For example, a police or firefighter participant may have a very different understanding of the words “culture,” “mental health,” and “PTSD” than someone who works in the medical field.

Another way to be culturally responsive is working with people in the language they prefer. This can be done through translators and interpreters, offering bilingual services, and making sure information they need to know is shared at a basic reading level. This is important to do both when talking to people and when sharing written information.

When language isn’t considered, people lose power to be as involved in their health as they need. It also causes people to feel mistrust and fear.

Culture goes hand-in-hand with language. To be culturally responsive, be sure to honor the languages people speak. This can have a positive effect on how people respond to care and whether or not they choose to continue their care.

Other things to think about in terms of language is what vocabulary certain cultures use. For example, when working with members of the LGBTQ community, you may want to find out what pronouns they prefer.

**Considerations when working with youth**

Youth face different pressures and barriers that affect mental health. Cultural understanding helps to bridge this.

**Access to care**

Youth, in general, aren’t likely to see mental health or substance use providers. For racially and ethnically diverse youth, however, it’s even less likely. For example, 2.3% of black or Hispanic youth see a mental health provider in a given year compared to 5.7% of white youth. When they go to a mental health provider, it’s usually because they were referred by their schools (not necessarily their families).

In some cultures, there’s a lot of stigma around mental health care. When this is the case, it’s less likely that parents will want their youth to be treated.

When there aren’t enough mental health providers, youth often aren’t able to get care even if they or their families want it. This commonly is the case in rural areas or places where there’s a lot of poverty.

**Challenges**

Going through the teenage years is a vulnerable time. But, it can be even more so for diverse youth. They often have more stress trying to fit in, accepting their cultural identity, and finding a balance between their own and mainstream cultures.

Youth are also faced with meeting the cultural expectations of their parents. Many non-Western
cultures have a “top down” and directive parenting style. This may put pressure on youth to do what their parents say while at the same time feeling peer pressure to act another way. If parents try to keep their youth from being around friends and peers, this can make mental health challenges even more challenging. Sometimes, parents and families expect the older children to take care of the younger ones due to cultural traditions or lack of resources. This can result in them not being able to participate in after-school activities with others their age.

**Family support**

Although family relationships can cause stress for youth, they also can do the opposite. For example, these relationships can protect youth from different problems. And they can be a support system for youth facing mental health or substance use challenges.

The table below shows different ways that family support strengthens youth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A positive connection between caregivers and youth</th>
<th>Feeling confident, capable, empowered, and optimistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal (or caregiver) warmth</td>
<td>Behaving well around others and being prepared for school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to fathers (or caregivers)</td>
<td>Choosing to not use drugs and alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers closely watching youth activities</td>
<td>Choosing not to start drinking even though others might be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cultural practices</td>
<td>Behaving in positive ways</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Considerations when working with youth**

To help youth face mental health or substance use challenges, let them explore who they are, express themselves, and share what kind of treatment they prefer.

**Support their identity**

Helping youth to figure out their cultural identity can have a positive impact on their mental health. When youth aren’t encouraged to do this, anxiety and depression may arise. Youth that have a positive idea of who they are more likely to stay away from alcohol and drugs. They’re also more likely to feel good about themselves. Cultural identity includes:

- A strong sense of who they are
- Feeling positive about their ethnicity and race
- Participating in cultural traditions
- Speaking native languages
- Enjoying being bicultural
**Promote positive outlets**
Find ways that youth can connect to activities that relate to their culture/s. Youth that do this are also more likely to stay away from alcohol and drugs and have a positive sense of who they are. Participating in social activities, like volunteering to help their community, has many positive benefits for youth.

**Keep culture in mind when looking at treatment options**
Find out what healing practices youth and their families prefer. They may want to connect with their religious or spiritual groups for care. Also, they may want indigenous healers and cultural community organizations to be involved.

**Question**

◊ How would you bring up a conversation with youth about cultural identity? How would you ask them about ways they’ve experienced discrimination and how these impact mental health?

---

**Cultural Identity**

- “I ignore or downplay my culture. I want to fit in with the majority.”
- “I’m confused and frustrated. I’m not sure where I belong.”
- “I’m committed, loyal, and I own my cultural identity. I’m anti-majority.”
- “I commit to my own culture in a positive and healthy manner. I’m flexible and accept both sides of the system.”
- “I value my own culture and can empathize/collaborate with all groups. I value variety and differences in all people.”

By Janet Helms. Adapted by Change Matrix.
# Glossary of Cultural Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. Redfield, R., Linton, R., &amp; Herskovits, M. J. (1936). Memorandum for the study of acculturation. American Anthropologist, 38, 149–152.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>Assimilating involves compellation to take on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society. <a href="https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society">https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society</a>. retrieved 3/5/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>An integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations. National Center for Cultural Competence, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Awareness</td>
<td>Being cognizant, observant and conscious of similarities and differences among cultural groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competence</td>
<td>Cultural competence, the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures, helps to ensure the needs of all community members are addressed. ... Cultural competence means to be respectful and responsive to the health beliefs and practices—and cultural and linguistic needs—of diverse population groups. SAMHSA Nov 10, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally- and Linguistically-Informed Practice</td>
<td>Culturally- and Linguistically-Informed Practices are a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enables effective work in cross-cultural situations. American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Resonance</td>
<td>Understanding the cultural contexts and unique cultural and historical characteristic of individuals in designing and promoting care interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Sensitivity</td>
<td>Understanding the needs and emotions of your own culture and the culture of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>the practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people. Merriam-Webster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disparities</td>
<td>Health disparities are the inequalities that occur in the provision of healthcare and access to healthcare across different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. There are several factors that lead to these disparities, such as poor access to healthcare, poverty, exposure to environmental problems, inadequate level of education, and other individual/behavioral factors. Medline Plus, 2017, NIH, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>The condition of having or being composed of differing elements. The inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races, cultures, backgrounds, opinions, religious/political beliefs, sexual orientations, heritage, and life experience) in a group or organization. Sue, D. W., Sue, D., &amp; Sue, D. W. (2003). Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice. New York: J. Wiley.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Equity is more than simply providing equal opportunity. Equity is giving individuals exactly what they need that is customized to their specific to their situational context, so that they can achieve the same health and success as others do. Sue, D. W., Sue, D., &amp; Sue, D. W. (2003). Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice. New York: J. Wiley.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Ethnicity
How one sees oneself and how one is “seen by others as part of a group on the basis of presumed ancestry and sharing a common destiny ...” Common threads that may tie one to an ethnic group include skin color, religion, language, customs, ancestry, and occupational or regional features. In addition, persons belonging to the same ethnic group share a unique history different from that of other ethnic groups. Usually a combination of these features identifies an ethnic group. For example, physical appearance alone does not consistently identify one as belonging to a particular ethnic group.

The Institute on Medicine (IOM), in a 1999 report edited by Haynes, M.A. and Smedley, B.D.

### Minority
Minority population is defined as the smaller in number of two groups constituting a whole; specifically: a group having less than the number of votes necessary for control; part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment; a member of a minority group.

Merriam-Webster’s Lerner’s Dictionary, 2017

### Race
Race is a social and cultural construct, specifically a “construct of human variability based on perceived differences in biology, physical appearance, and behavior”. The traditional conception of race rests on the false premise that natural distinctions grounded in significant biological and behavioral differences can be drawn between groups.

The Institute on Medicine (IOM), in a 1999 report edited by Haynes, M.A. and Smedley, B.D.

### Structural Bias
Prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair that occurs at a systemic or organizational level.

dictionary.com
References

8. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2016). Ensuring the Well-being of Boys and Young Men of Color: Factors that Promote Success and Protect Against Substance Use and Misuse

Resources

CHECKLISTS AND ASSESSMENTS

Implicit Bias Assessments
Project Implicit: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/faqs.html
Perception Institute: https://perception.org/research/implicit-bias/

Personal Reflection Checklist

Tools for Assessing Cultural Competence
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK248429/

NATIONAL WEBSITES

National Center for Cultural Competence
https://nccc.georgetown.edu/

Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity: A Supplement to Mental Health

Gender and Racial Fairness Resource Guide: National Center for State Courts
Resources

GENERAL INFORMATION

New York Times Article: The Roots of Implicit Bias

Cultural Awareness
http://www.culturoosity.com/articles/whatisculturalawareness.htm

Unite for Sight: Cultural Perspectives on Mental Health Module
http://www.uniteforsight.org/mental-health/module7

Cross Cultural Mental Health and Substance Use Fact Sheet
http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/cross-cultural-mental-health-and-substance-use

How Culture Influences Health
www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/culture/influence