Cultural Competence

Cultural competence implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual, an organization, or a system within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by consumers and their communities.[i]

Cultural competence, at the individual, organizational, and systems levels, involves:[ii]
- Being **respectful** of the health beliefs, practices, and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse people and groups. This includes:
    - Valuing cultural differences
    - Having an open mind
- Being **responsive** to the health beliefs, practices and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse people and groups. This includes:
    - Knowing something about the culture of the group that the interventions focus on
    - Customizing prevention and promotion in a way that respects and fits with the culture of the group that selected interventions target
    - Involving people from the targeted cultural group in assessing needs, developing resources, planning and implementing interventions, and evaluating their effectiveness—"Nothing about us without us"

Being respectful and responsive to the health beliefs, practices, and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse population groups can help bring about positive health outcomes.[iii]

Culture

Culture must be considered at every step of the Strategic Prevention Framework in order for diverse populations to benefit from selected interventions. It is especially important that the interventions chosen are a good match for the culture of the population group for which they are meant—attuned to their values, customs, beliefs, roles, manners of interacting, and communication styles. For example, an evidence-based program for a Native American community should involve Tribal elders in its development and dissemination.

> **"Culture refers to integrated patterns of human behavior that include the language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups."[iv]**

People typically think of culture in terms of race or ethnicity, but culture also refers to other social groups defined by characteristics such as age, gender, religion, income level, education, geographical location, sexual orientation, disability, or profession.

Culture includes the following elements:[v]
- Norms (how people behave)
- Values (what is important to people)
- Beliefs (what people think about something)
- Symbols (how people express themselves through art, stories, music, language, etc.)
- Practices (customs or patterns of behavior that may not be connected to beliefs and values)

Some elements of culture are easy to see, but most elements of culture are hidden. For example, in some cultures it is frowned upon for people to get help from professionals for emotional problems. This norm may prevent people from seeking the help they need. So when doing prevention for a particular population group, it is important to be aware of cultural norms and practices that may compromise the effectiveness of an intervention.

Cultural Competence Continuum

Developing cultural competence is an evolving, dynamic process that takes time and occurs along a continuum.[vi] The National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University's Center for Child and Human Development describes the six stages of this continuum:[vii]

- **Cultural destructiveness** – Attitudes and practices (as well as policies and structures in organizations) are destructive to a cultural group.

- **Culture incapacity** – The capacity to respond effectively to the needs, interests, and preferences of culturally and linguistically diverse groups is lacking.

- **Cultural blindness** – The predominant philosophy is one that views and treats all people as the same.

- **Cultural pre-competence** – There is awareness of strengths and areas for growth to respond effectively to culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

- **Cultural competence** – Acceptance and respect for culture is consistently demonstrated in policies, structures, practices, and attitudes.

- **Cultural proficiency** – Culture is held in high esteem and used as a foundation to guide all endeavors.

Skills for Cultural Competency

Culturally competent professionals are able to do the following when applying the steps of the Strategic Prevention Framework:[viii]

Assessment
- Accurately assess the influence of their own values, perceptions, opinions, knowledge, and social position on their interactions with others.
- Provide and promote an atmosphere in which similarities and differences can be explored, and understand that this process is not only cognitive but attitudinal and affective, as well.

Capacity
- Learn to be an ally to groups that experience prejudice and discrimination in the community. Help others learn to be an ally to their own cultural groups.
- Help expand other people's knowledge of their culture, and affirm and legitimize other people's cultural perspectives.

Planning
- Learn to embrace new, ambiguous, and unpredictable situations, and be persistent in keeping communication lines open when misunderstandings arise.
- Encourage community members to see themselves in a multicultural perspective, and encourage skills-building in cross-cultural interactions and communication.

Implementation
- Encourage and accommodate a variety of learning and participation styles, building on community members' strengths.
- Draw upon the experiences of participants or collaborators to include diverse perspectives in any given intervention.

Evaluation
- Be skeptical about the validity of diagnostic tools applied to people who are culturally different from those upon whom the norms were based.
- Understand, believe, and convey that there are no culturally deprived or culturally neutral individuals or groups, and that all cultures have their own integrity, validity, and coherence, and deserve respect.

Culturally Competent Organizations

Cultural competence applies to organizations and health systems, just as it does to professionals. A culturally competent organization:

Continually Assesses Organizational Diversity
- The organization conducts a regular assessment of members' experiences working with diverse communities and/or focus populations.
- The organization regularly assesses the range of values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences within the organization that would facilitate working with focus communities.

Invests in Building Capacity for Cultural Competency and Inclusion
- The organization has policies, procedures, and resources that facilitate the ongoing development of cultural competence and inclusion.
- The organization is willing to commit the resources necessary to build or strengthen relationships with groups and communities.
- Members are representative of the focus population.

Practices Strategic Planning that Incorporates Community Culture and Diversity
- The organization collaborates with other community organizations, and organization members are involved in supportive relationships with other community groups.
- The organization is seen as a partner by other community organizations and members.

Implements Prevention Strategies Using Culture and Diversity as a Resource
- Community members and organizations have had an opportunity to create and/or review audiovisual materials, public service announcements, training guides, printed resources, and other materials to ensure they are accessible to, and attuned to their community or focus population.

Evaluates the Incorporation of Cultural Competence
- There is a regular forum for a wide variety of community members to provide both formal and informal feedback on the impact of interventions in their community.