

**CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND SENSITIVITY**

**A GUIDE FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS CARING  
FOR NEW-BRUNSWICK'S CROSS-CULTURAL  
POPULATIONS**

**Public Health New Brunswick**

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# Purpose of this guide?

- The purpose of this guide is to act as a resource to health professionals increase their cultural competence and sensitivity when caring for patients, families, groups, and communities from different cultural backgrounds.
- Culture and health care share a strong bond and relationships with each impacting the other in numerous, complex, and dynamic ways.
- With increasing diversity in our province, there is a strong need for nurses and other health care providers to be culturally aware, sensitive, and competent to the needs of patients and families from various vibrant cultural backgrounds.

# WHAT IS CULTURE?

The term “culture” is a word used in daily life, yet, why do so many definitions exist? The definition of culture can be summarized by stating that culture is the essence of an individual and acts as a framework that guides daily life, actions, beliefs, values, and thoughts.

➤ It can be broken down and compartmentalized into three distinct dimensions:

1. **Subjective dimension:** This cultural dimension of an individual or group composes what an individual believes, the values they hold, the attitudes they exhibit, and the norms they feel are real and true.
2. **Interactive Dimensions:** Consists of the verbal and non-verbal interactions that form the basis of communication both internally amongst a group of similar people, and externally amongst differing groups.
3. **Material dimension:** It represents the textile objects such as clothing and artifacts used by an individual or group that can be identified as an element representing their culture.

# A KEY MESSAGE ABOUT CULTURE:

It is an important fact to remember that even amongst a group that identify themselves as being members of a particular cultural group, individuals within that group may interpret cultural dimensions differently, and hold differing beliefs and values.

Although a person's culture is influenced and rooted in ethnicity and race, these roots never solely define it.

# Why is cultural competence & sensitivity important?

- Canada is a multicultural and colorful country whose pride is greatly steeped in its diverse inhabitants and has always been welcoming country that embraces individuals and families from various ethno-cultural backgrounds.
- The nursing workforce has also become a diverse mix of individuals. In fact, we have seen a rise in percentage of the nursing workforce consisting of individuals who have graduated from an international program.
- **Cultural competence** is not a skill that is spontaneously acquired, or one that remains the same over time. Cultural competence requires a great deal of awareness, personal reflection, and constantly examining situations and approaching them without assumptions and preconceived notions.
- A culturally competent health provider is aware of terms, phrases and actions that may be interpreted as disrespectful, inappropriate, or culturally insensitive, and instead, strive to demonstrate respect and politeness.
- Like cultural competence, **cultural sensitivity** is another skill that is constantly changing and so health providers must relentlessly challenge themselves to remain sensitive to the holistic cultural needs of clients and families.

# Con't...Why is cultural competence & sensitivity important?

- Cultural sensitivity is predominantly rooted in respect and demonstrated by behavior and actions that are genuine, respectful and authentic. It is demonstrated when neutral verbal and non-verbal communication is used to relay sensitivity and appreciated for the diversity of others.
- There are many ways to improve one's culture sensitivity, one of those being possessing a broadened awareness of differences between cultures and by attending educational sessions or seminars that allow for the appreciation of differences that exist amongst cultures.
- Health providers must strive to integrate this appreciation of difference into individualized plans of care and approach all patients and situations from a holistic perspective.
- These above facts, coupled with the increasing need for nurses and health care providers to provide holistic care to patients and families, is the reason why cultural competence and sensitivity are critical components in which health care providers must be cognizant.

# Test your knowledge: Common myths

**Myth #1: There are too many cultures in the world. I cannot possibly learn what I need to know about all of them.**

Your right, there are lots of different cultures in the world! Being culturally competent does not mean you know all the different “characteristics” about certain cultures, it means being more aware of them. Here are ways of doing this:

- ✓ Recognizing and rejecting your own pre-conceived beliefs about culture.
- ✓ Recognizing how your own beliefs shape and influence your views on culture.
- ✓ Not labelling individuals or groups with cultural names allows you to avoid generalizations and culture misinformation's.
- ✓ Cultural competence and sensitivity training

# Common myths con't....

**Myth #2:** I have reflected and thought about my own preconceptions about the various cultures I encounter in my daily life and profession. My own identity has taught me what it means to be culturally sensitive. As such, I have now become culturally competent and able to care for people I will encounter from those differing cultures.

- ✓ No one becomes culturally competent overnight.
- ✓ It is a dynamic and ever challenging process.
- ✓ It is something that needs to be considered with every interaction and practiced throughout one's career.
- ✓ It is dangerous to label oneself as “culturally competent”, to believe that cultural competence can reach a pinnacle point, or that you have learned all there is to know about a particular culture.
- ✓ Even if people identify themselves as being of a particular culture, their experiences about culture are different, and therefore , important to not make assumptions.

# Common myths con't....

**Myth #3: I need a step-by-step guide and instruction on how to become culturally competent, not all this “touchy feely” kind of stuff. How can being more aware make me culturally competent?**

- ✓ Being aware is synonymous and equal to knowledge. It all begins with the eagerness and willingness to learn.
- ✓ Awareness is a complex skill gained over time that allows an individual the ability to reject or avoid acting on pre-conceived thoughts, to be inquisitive and gain new information, and to eventually resolve the case with cultural competence.

**Myth #4: I have already attended sessions on discrimination training, sexual harassment, and conflict resolution training. I know what I should and should not do in the eyes of the law.**

- ✓ Cultural competence and sensitivity is not something that is governed by law, instead, it is governed by one's own professionalism.
- ✓ It is about behaviours and actions that one can exhibit to improve an effectively communicate and form therapeutic bonds with individuals who identify themselves as being from a different culture than your own.
- ✓ Learn what others want by asking questions, doing your own research, becoming aware and approaching situations with respect and authenticity.

# The Facts:

## Individual nurses are responsible for gaining, maintaining, and continually demonstrating cultural competence

- ✓ The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) dictates that cultural competence and sensitivity are entry-level skills for registered nurses and key to building therapeutic and caring relationships with patients and co-workers from diverse backgrounds.
- ✓ Madeleine Leininger, a cultural theorist, wrote that without cultural knowledge, holistic caring behavior would be impossible.
- ✓ Transcultural nursing concepts and cultural care give nurses an entirely new way of understanding individuals, families and cultures.
- ✓ Cultural competence is not a static state of knowledge; instead, health providers must be intrinsically engaged and eager to learn each and every day.
- ✓ All clients deserve an individual **cultural assessment** as values, beliefs, and practices amongst individuals are varied and unique.

# Cultural Assessment

- 1. Cultural awareness:** Time must be spent to explore his/her own values, beliefs and prejudices in order not to risk imposing his/her own cultural biases with the patient. The health care professional (HCP) must also become aware as well of the values, beliefs, lifestyle and practices of the patient in order to become fully aware of the meaning and importance of cultural differences.
- 2. Cultural knowledge:** The HCP must find information and educate themselves about the applicable culture. It is also achieved by learning about the health-related socio-cultural and medical information about the relevant culture(s) encountered in their practice.
- 3. Cultural skill:** Based on the cultural knowledge gained, the practitioner completes a cultural assessment with the patient. Utilizing culturally appropriate education materials and incorporating important cultural factors in the plan of care. Assisting clients to access quality care such as communication tools (interpreters, gestures, sign language to effectively communicate) or cultural dietary needs for example.
- 4. Cultural encounter:** Is the process in which the practitioner encounters cross –cultural interactions with people who are culturally/ethnically different from oneself.
- 5. Cultural desire:** This important element deals with the need for individual sand organizations to have a curiosity, desire, and self-motivation in their desire to engage in the process of cultural competence. Wanting to show inherent respect for all individuals regardless of age, sex, socioeconomic status, religion, class, and ethnic or cultural group.

# Important Considerations in Your Day-to-Day Practice

- All registered nurses in Canada have an ethical obligation to provide care that is free of discrimination, labelling, and stereotyping based on cultural background.
- Immersion in a culture is an incredible opportunity that forges partnership, friendships, and enhances cultural sensitivity.
- In general, respect is generally perceived and appreciated in their health care interactions of all cultures.
- Use your curiosity. Research the culture, or any culture you are curious about or intersect with on a regular basis.
- Be open to adventure. Challenge yourself to try traditional foods and take part in traditional activities.
- Be cognizant of non-verbal language of cues from the other person's body language.
- Greetings and language. Make an effort and challenge yourself to learn simple words, phrases, and greetings. Learning one word a day is a great and realistic challenge!

# Important Considerations con't ...

- Physical and personal space are perceived different amongst individuals and thus important to assess to the degree of comfort with proximity to others, body movement
- Time. The concept of time varies amongst and within cultures. It is important for HCP to assess this variation as it can have numerous impacts on the delivery of health care services
- Ask questions. Do not be shy or worried to make mistakes and ask silly questions. It is how we learn the best! Body language.

**Do not be intimidated. Although it may seem intimidating or daunting, cultural competence is a life long process. Embrace the challenge and never stop learning!**

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