

HONORING DIVERSITY

Trauma may have different meanings in different cultures. Because traumatic stress may be expressed differently within different cultural frameworks, it is important for providers to work toward developing cultural competence (Barrow et. al, 2009). Differing patterns of caregiving across racial and ethnic groups also strongly underscore the need for culturally relevant services (Nicholson et. al., 2001).

Successful culturally competent services incorporate awareness of our own biases, prejudices and knowledge about the people we serve and their culture, in order to avoid imposing our own values on others. When working with people who are from different cultural backgrounds or who have other diversity issues:

- Get to know the groups in your community. All providers should get to know the cultures existing in their community, and seek to have diversity on their staff (Duran, 2006).
- Be aware of possible philosophical differences. For example, many providers from the dominant culture tend to promote individualism over collectivism, and many Western practitioners embrace a medical model for healing while indigenous cultures may believe that health is attained through the harmony of mind, body and spirit (Comas-Diaz, 2007).
- Recognize privilege. This includes recognition of professional power (the power differential between staff and the people who come to your agency for services). Seattle-based behavioral health specialist Karen Foley shares:

“We all need to examine our own provider biases. I think it’s important to become an ally against oppression. I’ve had to admit my own prejudices and look at all the ways I am privileged in order to better understand how I oppress, and once I can do that, I can notice the systems that keep oppression in place and take a stand against it. And then I can use my own power and privilege towards social change.”

- Be careful not to pathologize cultural differences or other kinds of diversity. And *never* imply that violence or abuse is the result of a particular culture’s norms or customs (Moses, 2010; Barrera, 2009). Shirley Moses of the Alaska Native Women’s Coalition points out that domestic violence and sexual assault are “not something that our Native culture has condoned.” Bethel advocate Daisy Barrera adds, “Domestic violence has no culture. Sexual abuse has no culture.”
- Be aware of additional issues that may make it harder to report abuse or reach outside the family or community for help, such as cultural issues or disability needs (the victim depends on the abuser as a personal attendant, for example). Shirley Moses says:

“You have women not wanting to report sexual abuse or domestic violence because

they know it will totally disrupt not only their own home, but their extended family. Or it might affect their friends that they are helping. There's a chain reaction in the village. Everybody knows what's happening, and if a woman takes a stand and is willing to report, they are often ostracized if they leave. They are ostracized if they stay" (Moses, 2010).

- Be aware of the importance of family ties in many cultures. A survivor shares:

“As I went through the healing process more, I stopped calling my mom. Stopped calling my brothers. I instinctively cut off all communication, which is a really difficult thing to do. In a lot of cultures, it's a big deal. In my culture, it's a big deal. You don't let go of your family. Your family is who you go to for support. When I pulled away, that was a big deal, but I felt an enormous sense of relief.”

A survivor of multi-abuse trauma discusses the importance of family in her culture:

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- Recognize that “recovery culture,” mental health “brain styles,” physical and neurodiversity (“autistic culture” or “deaf culture”) and socioeconomic background are diversity issues, as much so as race, gender, and sexual orientation, and need to be accommodated and respected.
- Communication should be age and developmentally appropriate as well as culturally relevant. For example, people with developmental issues such as FASD or autism may prefer – and need – very clear and direct communication, as opposed to the more indirect communication favored by some other groups. Referring to a *rule* as a *guideline* or a *recommendation* can be confusing for people who tend to interpret language literally (Attwood, 2007).
- Each culture has its own set of “unwritten rules” governing appropriate behavior. People from diverse cultures may or may not “know” the unwritten rules prevailing at a shelter or other agency. Staff rules may not reflect the cultural values of people receiving agency services and can induce fear, confusion, isolation and/or anger. Be conscious of the impact your worldview has on others.
- Be aware of additional safety issues that people from diverse backgrounds may need to be concerned about. For example, same-sex batterers use forms of abuse similar to heterosexual batterers but they have an additional weapon in the threat of “outing” their

partner to family, friends, employers or community (Lundy, 1993). If someone has immigrant status, an abuser may threaten the individual with deportation. If a person has a disability, an abuser may threaten to get public assistance or other benefits cut off (Leal-Covey, 2011).

- Use an interpreter when necessary, including for sign language. Avoid using children, relatives of the batterer or people who do not understand confidentiality and domestic violence, sexual abuse and stalking issues (Leal-Covey, 2011). A survivor shares:

“My mom had a tough time getting things – everything was in English. She read English really well. She spoke English really well, but she wasn’t understood. So a lot of times, people looked to me, because I was always with her, to translate for her English. Now I was a really good kid, so I didn’t take advantage of that power, but I could have very easily. We tend to do that when we rely on kids to translate for their parents.”

- Confidentiality may be an even more important issue for an undocumented person. People without documentation may fear being reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by law enforcement or social service personnel from whom they seek assistance (Jang, 1994). Reassure people with undocumented status that you are not required to tell ICE about them.
- To avoid reductionism or stereotypes, recognize that it is not possible to predict the beliefs and behaviors of individuals based on their race, ethnicity or national origin. In fact, one can never become truly “competent” or “proficient” in another’s culture (Chavez et. al., 2007).

Becoming culturally competent is a life-long process and requires advocates and other providers to do their homework on a daily basis. Ask for feedback. Develop flexibility and an open mind. Addressing violence involves addressing racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia and any other form of oppression that contributes to interpersonal violence.

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