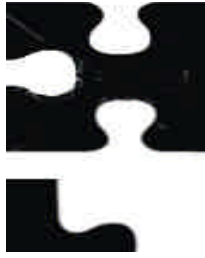


## What is Multicultural Competence in Mental Health and Why Should We Care?



*By Susan D. Writer, MA. Aurora Behavioral Health Care*



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When we talk about multicultural competence in mental health, we are broadly talking about a therapeutic understanding of the differences that individuals bring to the table that come out of their cultural heritage, and the need for us, as therapists, to adjust our approach to working with people based on these cultural differences.



In order for therapists to do this, we must start by doing two things:

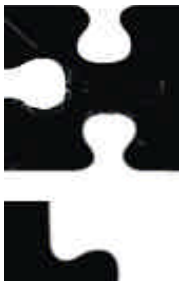
- (1) Therapists need to understand how our own culture has influenced our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the world around us; to develop an awareness of our own biases (that come from our own cultural heritages) and how those biases effect therapy.
- (2) Therapists also need to understand how other people's culture(s) influences their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the world and how cultural heritage influences their understanding of mental health and mental illness.

The first step can be a difficult process for many therapists because it requires that we look at ourselves critically and objectively in an effort to evaluate our assumptions about how the world works. Taking a step back from ourselves in this way is not easy, because we often have biases that are so deeply rooted that we don't even realize that they are there. So it often helps for therapists to consult with other mental health professionals along this path of self-exploration. The purpose of this self-reflection is not to change the cultural beliefs that we have, but rather to understand how our own personal belief systems can influence the way that we perceive and interact with the people with whom we work.

The second step is equally as complex a process, because culture influences people's beliefs and understandings of mental health and mental illness in many different ways. When we talk about "culture", we are not merely talking about someone's ethnic heritage. All sorts of things influence people's "cultural beliefs".

The following examples are just some of the questions that therapists may consider asking to gather information about culture:

(A) What is the person's ethnic origin, specifically the country of origin and in what part of that country did the family reside? Did the family live in a rural or urban part of the country? Was the country at peace or at war? Was the family an ethnic minority in their country of origin? People's ethnic background contributes significantly to their understanding of the world and the beliefs that they hold. But ethnicity is not the only important factor, understanding what their family's history was, is also important.



(B) What is the individual's immigration status? Was the person born in the U.S., or in another country? If born elsewhere, at what age did the person come to the U.S.? If born in the U.S., what generation? And how traditional is the family? How long people have lived in the U.S., and whether they were born here or in another country, contributes to their cultural beliefs. Individuals who were born in



## What is Multicultural... CONTINUED

the U.S. often hold different beliefs than their own family members who were born in their country of origin and sometimes this can cause rifts in families; it can also cause differences in cultural beliefs.



(C) How old is the person? This question helps the therapist understand what sort of historical events people have experienced both here in the U.S., and also in their country of origin if they were not

born here.

(D) What is the individual's primary language and what language is spoken at home? It is of vital importance that therapists know the answer to this question, because it directly impacts the ability to work together. The vocabulary of therapy is different from language to language, and there are some metaphors and expressions that cannot be directly translated from one language to another that can easily be missed or misinterpreted. So it is important for everyone to be able to communicate with one another clearly and effectively.



(E) What is the person's religious background? Religion often plays a significant role in defining cultural beliefs about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. And there are many other aspects of a person to consider as well, such as level of education, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, income level, political orientation, and profession, to name a few. All of these pieces contribute to people's culture and to their beliefs about life.

Once a person's cultural heritage is pieced together, the therapist can begin to get an understanding of a person's beliefs about the world, and more importantly about mental health and mental illness. Different cultures hold very different beliefs about whether mental health is important and about whether mental illness is acceptable. In addition, cultural beliefs influence the types of symptoms that people have and whether people think that these symptoms are due to mental illness or something else entirely. These beliefs directly impact whether people are willing to seek help and participate in treatment, and what types of treatment will be acceptable.

All of these factors combined together contribute to the success or failure of therapists who work with diverse individuals. Therapists need to become aware of their own strengths and limitations when working with diverse individuals, and they also need to become educated about the unique perspectives that these individuals have when coming to therapy. It is not necessary that the therapist and the client have the same cultural background, but it is necessary that the therapist is aware of the differences and similarities and knows how to work with the individual to create a meaningful therapeutic experience – this is multicultural competence. And multicultural competence is imperative if we, as therapists, want to help those in need of services. Multicultural competence empowers us to facilitate healing in a culturally sensitive and competent way that will foster the best possible outcome for our clients: improved mental health and an improved quality of life.



*About the author: Susan Writer has her Masters in Clinical Psychology and is a doctoral candidate at Alliant International University. She is the Community Outreach Liaison at Aurora Behavioral Health Care, the elite psychiatric hospital in Rancho Bernardo - serving children, adolescents, adults and seniors in crisis with mental health and chemical dependency related issues.*

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