



Cultural Competence: Essential Ingredient for Successful Transitions of Care

Health care professionals increasingly recognize the crucial role that culture plays in the healthcare of a client or patient^a and the need to deliver services in a culturally competent manner. Cultural competence is essential to successful, client-/patient-centered transitions of care. This tool provides information about culture and cultural competence, as well as strategies and resources to enhance professionals' capacity to deliver culturally competent services during transitions of care.

DEFINITIONS

What Is Culture?

Culture is “the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.”¹ Culture may include, but is not limited to, race, ethnicity, national origin, and migration background; sex, gender, gender identity, or gender expression; sexual orientation and marital or partner status; age and socioeconomic class; religious and political belief or affiliation; and physical, mental, or cognitive disability.

Given the many facets of *culture*, it is worth noting that every exchange is, potentially, a cross-cultural exchange; two individuals are unlikely to be identical in every aspect of cultural identity and expression.

What Is Multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism is “an orientation that recognizes, supports, and accommodates a variety of sociocultural practices and traditions . . . and promotes the value of diversity as a core principle.”²

What Is Cultural Competence?

Cultural competence is “the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.”³

What Is Linguistic Competence?

a. For the purpose of this document, the term client/patient refers to the person being served by a health care professional. The term can be interchanged with *consumer, resident, beneficiary, member*, or other term appropriate to the professional's setting.

Linguistic competence is a key component of cultural competence. On an operational level, it entails “providing readily available, culturally appropriate oral and written language services to limited English proficiency (LEP) members [individuals] through such means as bilingual/bicultural staff, trained medical interpreters, and qualified translators,”⁴ among other practices.

What Are Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services?

Culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS) are “respectful of and responsive to cultural and linguistic needs.”⁵ In other words, culturally and linguistically competent practitioners, systems, and policies yield culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

What Are Care Transitions?

Care transitions, or *transitions of care*, “refers to the movement patients make between health care practitioners and settings as their condition and care needs change during the course of a chronic or acute illness.”⁶

What Is Transitional Care?

Transitional care is “a set of actions designed to ensure the coordination and continuity of health care as patients transfer between different locations or different levels of care within the same location.”⁷ Cultural competence is an essential ingredient of transitional care.

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND IMPROVE TRANSITIONS OF CARE^b

Striving for cultural competence requires ongoing action on multiple levels. In developing its standards and indicators for cultural competence in social work practice, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) identified multiple aspects of cultural competence.⁸ These components, outlined below with action tips, can guide all health care providers in delivering culturally competent services during transitions of care.

Ethics and Values

Cultural competence complements the values of self-determination, client-/patient-centeredness, and individual dignity and worth inherent in many health care professions.

Strategies

- Adhere to professional values, ethics, and standards, while recognizing how these values both conflict with and accommodate the needs of a multicultural clientele.
- Refer to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*⁹ and other United Nations conventions and declarations¹⁰ for global context related to cultural competence.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness of personal and cultural values, beliefs, and biases informs practice and influences relationships with clients/patients.

Strategies

- Develop an understanding of one’s personal and cultural values and beliefs and how those values and beliefs influence practice.

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- Understand and acknowledge how fear, ignorance, and systemic oppression (including, but not limited to, ageism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, racism, and sexism) influence one's attitudes and actions, and take steps to eliminate personal bias.
- Use cultural self-awareness to appreciate the multicultural identities of clients/patients and colleagues.

Cross-Cultural Knowledge

Knowledge regarding various cultural groups contributes to culturally competent practice, provided health care professionals acknowledge individual differences within cultural groups and avoid stereotypes.

Strategies

- Develop and maintain understanding of the history, traditions, values, family systems, and communication patterns of major client/patient groups served.
- Develop and maintain knowledge regarding the influence of culture on help-seeking behaviors and perceptions of health, illness, health care treatments, disability, caregiving roles, and death and dying among client/patient groups served.

Cross-Cultural Skills

Health care providers apply cultural self-awareness and cross-cultural knowledge in the development and employment of cross-cultural skills.

Strategies

- Use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect an understanding of the role of culture in the helping process.
- Demonstrate genuineness, empathy, warmth, openness, and flexibility to facilitate client/patient engagement throughout service delivery.
- Distinguish between culturally normative and symptomatic behaviors and assess cultural strengths and challenges and their impact on functioning and health.
- Communicate information about cultural groups or characteristics in a strengths-based manner.

Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Service Delivery

Cultural and linguistic competence is reflected not only in interactions between individual health care professionals and clients/patients but also in service delivery systems.

Strategies

- Incorporate cultural competence in the mission and goals of the organization.
- Effectively use culturally and linguistically appropriate organizational and community resources on behalf of clients/patients.
- Maintain knowledge regarding the cultural composition of targeted client/patient populations, including preferred languages, and tailor services to maximize client/patient access and transitional care outcomes.
- Engage clients/patients from various cultural groups in development and evaluation of service delivery systems and transitional care.

- Conduct individual and organizational assessment, on an ongoing basis, of cultural and linguistic competence in health care delivery.

Workforce

A multicultural workforce engaged in ongoing education and training in cultural and linguistic competence is integral to providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

Strategies

- Implement organizational policies and practices, including hiring and retention policies, that foster multiculturalism within all levels of the organization, ensuring various client/patient groups served are represented among personnel.
- Promote acquisition and application of specialized expertise (such as bilingual and bicultural skills) among staff to ensure services are culturally appropriate.
- Include cultural competence requirements in recruiting practices, performance evaluations, and promotion decisions.
- Advocate for and participate in educational and training programs that advance cultural competence among staff and reduce disparities in health care delivery and outcomes.

Advocacy

Realization of culturally competent policies and services related to transitions of care requires advocacy at both the client and systemic levels. Such advocacy can help reduce health care disparities.

Strategies

- Maintain awareness of how health care, social, and economic policies and programs, as well as societal and community power differentials, affect various client/patient groups and contribute to gaps in care.
- Advocate for culturally and linguistically appropriate programs and policies to meet the needs of various client/patient groups served and to improve transitional care.
- Partner with client/patient groups in advocacy efforts and promote client/patient self-advocacy.

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RESOURCES RELATED TO CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.ahrq.gov>

- Provides extensive resources addressing cultural and linguistic competence and health disparities.

Case Management Society of America (CMSA) Educational Resource Library

<http://www.cmsa.org/education>

- Offers multiple Web-based courses, including *Cultural Diversity: Working Together in a Diverse World*.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

<http://www.cdc.gov/omhd>

- Partners with governments and organizations to improve health among racial and ethnic minorities; offers training opportunities for students and recent graduates.

Commonwealth Fund

<http://www.commonwealthfund.org>

- Offers multiple publications related to cultural and linguistic competence.

The Disparities Solutions Center at Massachusetts General Hospital

<http://www2.massgeneral.org/disparitiessolutions/index.html>

- Offers publications and partners with local, state, and national organizations on various projects to reduce health care disparities.

Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

<http://www.hrsa.gov/culturalcompetence>

- Features a Web page dedicated to cultural competence resources for health care providers and organizations.

Institute of Medicine (IOM)

<http://www.iom.edu>

- Offers numerous publications related to health disparities.

Joint Commission

<http://www.jointcommission.org/PatientSafety/HLC/>

- Offers multiple publications related to cultural competence, such as *Hospitals, Language, and Culture: A Snapshot of the Nation*.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

<http://www.socialworkers.org>

- Offers standards and indicators to guide culturally competent social work practice and a Web-based education course, *Achieving Cultural Competence to Reduce Health Disparities in End of Life Care*.

National Center for Cultural Competence (Georgetown University)

<http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/index.html>

- Offers numerous online resources related to cultural and linguistic competence, including self-assessments for health care practitioners and community health centers.

National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA)

<http://www.clashealth.org>

- Offers a free toolkit, *Multicultural Health Care: A Quality Improvement Guide*, developed in collaboration with Eli Lilly and Company, and an extensive resource library related to cultural and linguistic competence.

National Health Law Program

<http://www.healthlaw.org/>

- Offers resources related to language access, racial disparities, and other topics.

National Multicultural Institute

<http://www.nmci.org>

- Provides consulting, training, and publications to individuals, organizations, and communities.

National Quality Forum

<http://www.qualityforum.org>

- Addresses multiple topics related to cultural competence, including measurement frameworks, organizational strategies, and disparity-reducing guidelines.

Office for Civil Rights (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

<http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/civilrights/resources/specialtopics/index.html>

- Offers information about several topics, including health disparities, HIV/AIDS, and serving people with limited English proficiency.

Office of Minority Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

<http://www.omhrc.org>

- Offers multiple resources related to cultural competence and health disparities, including *National Standards on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS)* and training tools for health care providers.