

Enhancing Patient Engagement Through Cultural Competence

Contributing authors on behalf of Team Best Practices:

Jennifer Gilmore, BSN, RN, University of Toledo

Dean Bricker, MD, Wright State University

Esther Thatcher, PhD, RN, Case Western Reserve University

Ruth Ludwick, PhD, RN-BC, Northeast Ohio Medical University

Srini Hejeebu, DO, University of Toledo

Health care beliefs are the attributions, values, and attitudes people hold regarding health, sickness, treatment, and healing.

These beliefs may be wide-ranging and are influenced by many factors, including culture, religion, ethnicity, literacy, self-efficacy, past experiences, personal autonomy, and degree of trust in health care providers.¹ Effective, culturally sensitive, and patient-centered care is highly dependent on the foundation of understanding and respecting an individual's health care beliefs.²

Studies have shown that patient beliefs have a greater impact on medication adherence than external barriers, such as cost or transportation.³ When patients doubt the efficacy of prescribed treatments or their ability to follow through, they may be less likely to engage in their treatment. Effective communication is essential to address misconceptions and build trust in the treatment plan.⁴

Respect for people from diverse cultures, combined with an understanding of one's own beliefs and limitations, is foundational to fostering the open communication that is vital to improving both initial and ongoing adherence to treatments.⁵



Overview of Various Cultures, Values, and Health Care Beliefs

The population of the United States is becoming more diverse. By 2060, the current majority group (non-Latino, white) is projected to decrease from 62% to 44%. In addition, the number of first-generation immigrants has increased and is expected to account for 17% of the population by 2040.⁴

Ohio is home to a wide variety of cultural, religious, and ethnic groups, including large populations of Amish communities in central Ohio and regions of Appalachian influence.⁶⁻⁸

Health care providers can expect that patients representing certain cultural groups have values that differ from their own. While understanding general trends can be a good starting point, it is important to remember that generalized statements may not apply to particular individuals.⁹ Cultural stereotypes are often inaccurate and can lead to bias and negative outcomes. Acknowledging people as unique individuals and understanding their values, goals, and challenges — also known as individuating — can help reduce bias.¹⁰

Table 1. Examples of Cultural Values and Potential Influences on Health Care Beliefs^{9,11}

Sample Cultural Value	Influence on Health Care
The extended family has significant influence and older relatives are respected and unquestioned	Oldest male may be the health care decision-maker
Importance is placed on maintaining accord and avoiding conflict	May not voice disagreement with provider recommendations even if the patient and family do not agree with or plan to follow treatment recommendations
Preference for authoritarian relationships and being told what to do versus asked what to do	Patients may mistrust Western medicine and find it difficult to question a physician and talk openly about medical concerns
Since individual behavior reflects on the family, mental illness or any behavior that indicates lack of self-control may produce shame and guilt	A reluctance to discuss mental illness, such as depression
Certain diagnoses within the family may reduce the chances of other members of the family getting married	A reluctance to accept a diagnosis of mental illness or developmental delay
Illness may be seen as God's will or divine punishment brought about by previous or current sinful behavior	May prefer to involve clergy or pray for God to guide the physicians
Belief in living in total harmony with nature where illness is not viewed as an alteration in a person's physiological state but as an imbalance between the patient and natural or supernatural forces	Traditional healers may be combined with the use of Western medicine

Practical Application: Assessing Health Care Beliefs

A cultural assessment is a method used to identify a patient's beliefs and practices, taking into consideration their environment, social interactions, and past experiences. Health care providers may choose to use a cultural assessment tool or questionnaire to obtain this information. The objective of these assessments is to learn more about the patient's beliefs and practices and consider this information when developing a care plan with the patient.¹¹



The 4 C's of Culture is a mnemonic developed to help providers remember questions that elicit answers that reveal the patient's perspective of their condition.^{9,11}

Table 2. The 4 C's of Culture⁹

1. What do you **CALL** the problem?
2. What do you think **CAUSED** the problem?
3. How do you **COPE** with your condition?
4. What are your **CONCERNS** regarding the problem?

Communication Pearls:

- Notice body language: if the patient is quiet or appears anxious, it may be a sign that they are afraid to say they are conflicted. Silence can also be a sign of respect that may be misinterpreted as disinterest.
- Ask the patient and family open-ended questions to learn about the patient's understanding and expectations.
- Remain non-judgmental when given information that reflects values that differ from your own.
- Listen and adhere to patients' guidance about improving communication between health care providers and patients and families.

Normalizing the discussion of cultural or religious customs, which may be sensitive topics, can be done using statements such as “Many of my patients have cultural practices that are important for me to be aware of so that I can provide the best possible care.”¹²

Example questions that help identify patient beliefs or traditions^{9,11}

- How strictly do you adhere to the beliefs and practices of your culture?
- Are there health problems that carry a stigma in your culture?
- Are there tests/procedures/treatments that violate cultural norms?
- Are there traditional dietary habits that conflict with the plan of care?
- What is your attitude toward Western medicine?
- Do you use alternative medicines or therapies?

After determining the patient’s understanding of their illness and the influence of their beliefs, it is essential to include the patient in the development of their plan of care.

Example open questions that promote patient-centered treatments^{9,11}

- What are the most important results you hope to get from this treatment?
- What are the chief problems your illness has caused for you?
- What do you fear most about your illness?

Strategies for Managing the Needs of Diverse Populations¹³

The best care includes treatment strategies that meet the needs of all patients.

Promoting cultural awareness for health care professionals is a good starting point, and the following strategies go further. For clinics that do not have the resources to implement the strategies as written, the links to additional materials may help them meet the needs of diverse populations.¹⁴

- **Language.** Provide interpreter services during encounters and avoid using children as interpreters. Ensure that all aspects of the patient's interactions can be completed in their preferred language, including appointment scheduling, telephone calls, billing, and written materials.^{13,15}
- **Accessibility.** Arrange service hours and locations to make it easier for patients to attend clinic visits.
- **Staffing.** Hire and retain culturally informed staff. Incorporate community health workers.
- **Culturally Informed Care Providers.** Provide training on cultural skills and knowledge. Connect with community cultural leaders and advocates. Include family or other community members in health care decision making when appropriate.^{13,16}

Additional Resources

- **Communication in Care: Cultural Competency**
qualityinteractions.com/blog/topic/cultural-competency
- **Practicing Cultural Humility When Serving Immigrant and Refugee Communities**
ethnomed.org/resource/practicing-cultural-humility-when-serving-immigrant-and-refugee-communities/
- **Think Cultural Health**
thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/resources/library

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