

Cultural Competence: Common Definitions, Terms, & Concepts

In this month's segment, our focus is on familiarizing ourselves with common terms, definitions, and concepts associated with Cultural Competence. These terms will provide additional clarity in our understanding of cultural competence. In future issues, we will extend our discussion deeper by comparing common terms and concepts then discussing their similarities and differences i.e. race & ethnicity. For now, preview these terms to increase our comprehensive understanding of cultural competence.

Culture is broadly defined as a common heritage or set of beliefs, norms, and values. It refers to the shared, and largely learned, attributes of a group of people.

Cultural Awareness is developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values. Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others. Cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge.

Culture Bound Syndrome denotes recurrent, locality-specific patterns of aberrant behavior and troubling experience that may or may not be linked to a particular DSM-IV diagnostic category. Many of these patterns are indigenously considered to be "illness", or at least afflictions, and most have local names.

Cultural Knowledge is familiarization with selected cultural characteristics, history, values, belief systems, and behaviors of the members of another ethnic group.

Cultural Sensitivity is knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences.

Culture Shock is a form of anxiety that results from an inability to predict the behavior of others, or act appropriately in a cross-cultural situation.

Ethnicity refers to a common heritage shared by a particular group.

Generalization is a starting point. When generalizing, one begins with an assumption about a group but then seeks further information about whether the assumption fits that individual.

Linguistic Competence is the capacity of an organization to communicate effectively, and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences including persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not literate, and individuals with disabilities.

Race is thought of by most people as a biological category – as a way to divide and label different groups according to a set of common biological traits. However, “race” is not a biological category, but it does have meaning as a social category. Different cultures classify people into racial groups according to a set of characteristics that are socially significant.

Stereotype is an ending point. When stereotyping, one makes an assumption about a person based on group membership without learning whether or not that individual fits the assumption.