

PHILOSOPHY & VALUES

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The Department of Mental Health's Mission and its Values Statements clearly embrace the concept of cultural diversity. The Values Statement on Cultural Diversity states:

“All people are valued for and receive services that reflect and respect their race, culture, and ethnicity.”

Differences between Race, Culture and Ethnicity

The report: Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity--A Supplement to Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General contains the following definitions:

“Race: Most people think of ‘race’ as a biological category — as a way to divide and label different groups according to a set of common inborn biological traits (e.g., skin color, or shape of eyes, nose, and face). No consistent racial groupings emerge when people are sorted by physical and biological characteristics. For example, the epicanthic eye fold that produces the so-called “Asian” eye shape is shared by the Kung San Bushmen, members of an African nomadic tribe. 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. The concept of race is especially potent when certain social groups are separated, treated as inferior or superior, and given differential access to power and other valued resources.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity refers to a common heritage shared by a particular group (Zenner, 1996). Heritage includes similar history, language, rituals, and preferences for music and foods.

Culture: Culture refers to the shared, and largely learned, attributes of a group of people. People who are placed, either by census categories or through self-identification, into the same racial or ethnic group are often assumed to share the same culture. Yet this assumption is an over-generalization because not all members grouped together in a given category will share the same culture. Many may identify with other social groups to which they feel a stronger cultural tie such as being Catholic, Texan, etc.”

Becoming Culturally Competent

As Missouri becomes more diverse DD staff will be challenged to provide services and supports while considering the ethnically and culturally unique needs of families, self-advocates and colleagues. To be successful in working with and supporting individuals from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, DD staff must be aware and accepting of cultural and ethnic differences. In order to plan and provide supports to people from distinctly different cultures and ethnic

groups, staff need to recognize their own cultural and ethnic values. Individuals who are successful in working with persons from varying cultures and who plan and provide supports within the context of cultural and ethnic differences are “culturally competent” and reflect the values of the Department of Mental Health.

It is important to have a basic knowledge about the culture and ethnic background of the person seeking services as well as the ability to adapt skills to fit the person’s cultural context. If one is aware, for instance, that making frequent eye contact is considered aggressive by some cultures, interactions may be adapted accordingly. Here are some other essential elements for becoming a culturally competent support coordinator (formally known as service coordinator):

- The first task in developing cross-cultural skills is to acknowledge cultural differences and to become aware of how they affect the process of developing and providing supports. While all people share common needs, there are vast differences in how people of various cultures go about meeting those needs. Having an awareness and acceptance in differences in communication, life view and the definition of health and family are critical in developing successful supports.
- To fully appreciate cultural differences, staff must recognize the influence of their own culture on how they act and think. How one defines family, determines desirable life goals or even says hello is influenced by the culture in which one functions.
- The “dynamics of difference” (Slaughter, 1998) must be understood. When a staff person of one culture interacts with someone from another culture, both will bring to the interaction their own unique history, patterns of communication, etiquette and problem solving. Both may bring stereotypes or underlying feelings about working with someone who is different. One clear example of the “dynamics of difference” is when two persons meet and shake hands. In some Native American cultures a passive hand is offered as a symbol of humility and respect, while the average American tends to respect a person for the firmness of his grip. Understanding such cultural differences will help prevent the support coordinator from making incorrect assumptions about others.
- Staff must make a conscious effort to understand the meaning of someone’s behavior within his or her cultural context. Asking, “what does this person’s behavior signify in his or her group” helps avoid assessing someone based on the norms of the dominant society. For example: In Hispanic culture it is not unusual for someone to touch and stand very close to people with whom they are speaking, while in other cultures this behavior may seem rude and intrusive.
- Staff must know where and how to obtain necessary detailed information for use in specific situations. (Where can a translator be found? Where can staff find out more about a particular religion, traditions etc?)

(Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Iasacs, 1989)

TIPS FOR CROSS CULTURAL INTERACTIONS:

- Be aware of the impact of culture on behavior, especially on communication.
- Be prepared to look at peoples' responses to a situation from points of view other than your own.
- Learn to deal with ambiguity.
- Understand that biases and stereotypes often get in the way and need to be recognized.
- Carefully observe the behavior of others before coming to any conclusions.
- Challenge your own assumptions about other cultures and help others challenge theirs.
- Always be willing to seek out answers to difficult questions about culture.
- Strive to build rapport with people having differing values.
- Be willing to adapt your communication style when the situation demands it.