

What is Cultural Sensitivity?

An important component of a person-centred assessment is the continual recognition that culture plays a significant role in determining the person's view of the problem and the treatment.

Assessment approaches for concurrent disorders should consider the influence of:

- Race and ethnicity
- Gender expression
- Sexual orientation
- Disability status
- Socioeconomic level
- Religious and spiritual affiliation

Culture and mental illness

Cultures vary widely in terms of how they view the causes of mental illness and addiction. These views can range from spirit possession (for example, by malevolent ancestors) to character or genetic flaws or weakness of the person. Therefore, some cultures have very powerful stigmas against those who suffer from mental health or addiction problems.

Stigma can make a person unwilling to acknowledge the problem (to themselves and to others) and to disclose their symptoms. Stigma can also limit a person's ability or willingness to participate in any form of treatment, including pharmacological and psychosocial interventions.

Culture and treatment

Culture also influences how persons view appropriate treatment. Psychotropic medications may be rejected in

favour of alternative biological agents (such as herbs in traditional Chinese medicine). In addition, many cultures do not recognize concepts like talk therapy.

Explore these issues openly, honestly, and from a place of curiosity to see how others from a particular cultural background may view these issues. Ask for information about how they may deal with these apparently contradictory ways of viewing personal challenges.

Suggested approaches

- Ensure you are aware of the person's cultural norms.
- Explore expectations and beliefs that may have been shaped by experiences of racism and discrimination, and be cautious in determining how these affect the assessment process.
- Be aware that some people may not be forthright during assessment because their cultural background does not condone self-disclosure of problems outside of family.
- Work towards building rapport and trust before exploring areas that require significant self-disclosure.
- Language barriers may influence the outcome of assessment interviews. Take your time to understand and clarify what the person is saying. If necessary, work through an interpreter.
- Some people may find they do not fit into the substance use or mental health treatment cultures. Clinicians should explore the person's comfort with treatment settings before referring them to treatment.

Suggested activity

By yourself or with your team, identify what cultural and ethnic groups you work with most often:

- Think about the ways in which assessment is influenced by cultural issues.
- In what ways do the cultures you work with respond to assessment?
- What can you do to the make assessment more culturally friendly?