

Cultural Competency

Understanding its importance can help eliminate health care inequalities



What is cultural competency?

Cultural competency is the ability of individuals, as reflected in personal and organizational responsiveness, to understand the social, linguistic, moral, intellectual and behavioral characteristics of a community or population.

Cultural competency is also the ability to translate this understanding systematically to enhance the effectiveness of health care delivery to diverse populations.

At Aetna Better Health®, we promote cultural competency and education to help eliminate health care inequalities. We encourage providers to treat all members with dignity and respect (as required by federal law*) including honoring members' beliefs, being sensitive to cultural diversity, and fostering respect for members' cultural backgrounds.

What are the keys to being culturally competent?

Awareness

Being aware of your own individual biases and reactions to people who are of a culture or background significantly different from your own.

By being aware of your own internal biases you can begin to work towards other aspects of cultural competency.

Attitude

The significance of attitude in cultural competence is to delineate the difference between just being aware of cultural differences and actively analyzing your own internal belief systems and developing awareness.

What does it mean to be culturally competent?

Cultural Competence is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.

Cultural competence encompasses:

- Being aware of one's own world view
- Developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences
- Gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views

*Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, and national origin in programs, and activities receiving federal financial assistance, such as Medicaid.

Knowledge

Research into human behavior has shown that our values and beliefs about equality may not line up with our actual behaviors and further we often are ignorant as to the degree of difference between our beliefs and our actions. It has been shown that people who may test well regarding having low prejudices may in fact act with great prejudice when interacting with other cultures.

Understanding this disconnect is why knowledge is considered a key aspect of developing one's own cultural competence.

Skills

This component is about taking practices of cultural competency and repeating them until they become integrated into one's daily behaviors.

The most important aspect of the skills component is having an excellent grasp on effective and respectful communication whether within an organization or between individuals. For example, an often-overlooked aspect of communication is body language and the sometimes-extreme variation in the meaning of gestures between one culture and another.

Integration

Once you begin to integrate all four components into your day to day behaviors, your degree of cultural competence will increase dramatically. By being aware of your internal learned biases, having an attitude that reflects a desire to deeply understand your own behavior, showing a high degree of knowledge of the subject and implementing the skills of cultural competency, you'll soon move from the realm of theory and learning to that of active practice.

As the world becomes more global, the need for a high degree of cultural competence will only grow and in few fields will this be a more important trait than in that of Human Services.

Developing your own cultural competency will help you to become the most effective human services worker possible and will greatly increase your chances of gaining and maintaining employment in the field.

Questions?

We're here to help. Just contact Provider Engagement at **[1-866-638-1232](tel:1-866-638-1232)**.

Please visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website (**[HHS.gov](https://www.hhs.gov)**) for more information and training courses.

References

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