



*A Professional Growth Module:*

# **UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

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Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time

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A Professional Growth Module:

## Understanding Cultural Diversity

### IT'S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL!

There's a lot of talk about cultural diversity these days. But what does cultural diversity really mean?

"Culture" is a name for all the beliefs and behaviors shared by a particular group of people. "Diversity" is another word for variety.

So, "cultural diversity" means that a variety of groups with different beliefs and behaviors live together in the same place. There have always been many diverse cultures living together within the United States. But, cities and towns across America are becoming more diverse every year!

Your job brings you in touch with many people every day. Chances are, your coworkers and clients are a culturally diverse group. For example, you may work with people who grew up speaking Spanish...or

who believe that sickness robs a person's soul...or who wear a special necklace to guard against the Evil Eye.

Some of these cultural differences may seem strange, funny or even stupid. However...your beliefs may seem just as strange to other people.

To get along in a culturally diverse environment, it's important to:

- Learn all you can about the differences between people.
- Try to accept other people's habits and beliefs—even if you don't agree with them.
- Look at each day as an opportunity to learn something new about another culture.

Keep reading to learn more about the exciting and challenging issue of cultural diversity!

### Your Sense of Culture Comes From...

- Where you live.
- How often you move to a new place.
- Your race.
- The language(s) you speak.
- Your religious beliefs.
- Your values.
- The size of your family.
- The foods you prefer.
- The work that you do.
- Whether you are male or female.
- Your political beliefs.
- Your family traditions.



**Every person has the right to receive courtesy and respect from others.**



## ***IMPORTANT!***

Throughout this inservice, you'll read a lot of generalizations about people—because we are discussing the *general* traits of different cultures. It's important to learn about these common cultural traits and beliefs...without making any judgments. Please keep in mind that regardless of their racial, ethnic or religious background, your clients and coworkers are individuals and they may not behave like other members of their culture.

### ***Describe Yourself...***

Please think of one or two sentences that best describe who you are. You can use this space to write down your thoughts.

**I am:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***When describing yourself, don't think about it too long. Just jot down the first things you would want someone to know about you.***

### ***What Did You Come Up With?***

What words did you use first in your description? You may have written about yourself in terms of:

- Sex. ("I am a woman...")
- Nationality. ("I am Irish...")
- Age. ("I am thirty-six...")
- Race. ("I am an Asian American...")
- Job. ("I am a nursing assistant...")
- Personality. ("I am a kind person...")
- Location. ("I am a New Yorker...")
- Physical Traits. ("I am strong...")

***NOTE: Obviously, there is no right or wrong way to describe yourself. But, this exercise may show what you value most about yourself—and your culture.***



**"America is a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams."  
Jimmy Carter**

## A Few Words on Culture...

In any discussion on cultural diversity, it's important to review the definitions for a few important terms. They include:

- **Culture** is a name for all the beliefs and behaviors shared by a particular group of people.
- **Behaviors** are the ways people act based on the beliefs and values they have learned.
- **Beliefs** are "truths" that most people living in a particular culture agree on...and live their lives by.
- When beliefs are grouped together, they form **values**—a *code of ethics* that tell members of a culture what is right and what is wrong.
- An **homogenous society** is one in which most of the people share the same beliefs and values.
- The United States is a **heterogeneous society**, meaning that its members come from a number of different cultural groups.
- **Ethnicity** is a *group identity* based on culture, language and/or religion.
- People are considered **ethnocentric** if they believe that their own cultural values and traditions are superior to others.
- **Race** is a *biological* term for classifying people who have the same physical characteristics.
- **Racism** is the belief that some human population groups are naturally superior or inferior to others simply because of their genetic characteristics.
- When people from one culture are thrust into another culture, they may feel **culture shock**—a form of anxiety that comes from not being able to predict how others will behave.
- **Cultural blindness** comes from the assumption that people are all basically alike. People who are culturally "blind" believe that whatever works with members of one culture should work within *all* other cultures.
- The term **cultural competence** was first used in relation to health care services—but has now spread to schools and other industries across America. For health care workers to be culturally competent means that they must provide services that are respectful of and responsive to the cultural and language needs of *each* client.



*"When you learn something from people, or from a culture, you accept it as a gift, and it is your lifelong commitment to preserve it and build on it."*

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma

▼  
**"Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures."**

Cesar Chavez

## More Good Words to Know!

### **Generalization.**

When we *generalize* about people, we assume that everyone in a certain group or culture behaves the same way. But, at the same time, we know that everyone is an individual, and we accept it when people are different.

- Example: *Sally is a CNA at a nursing home where many of the residents are Jewish and follow a Kosher diet. When a new resident, Mr. Goldberg, moves in, Sally doesn't offer him milk when his meal includes meat. (She generalizes that because he is Jewish, he must eat Kosher foods.) But, when Mr. Goldberg asks her for milk, Sally learns that he does not follow a Kosher diet. Now, she remembers to offer him milk at every meal.*

▼  
***It is human nature to fear the unknown. Unfortunately, fear is the basis of many stereotypes and prejudices.***

**Stereotype.** When we *stereotype* others, we make up our minds about people based on a certain idea we have of them...without ever taking the time to find out about them as individuals.

- Example: *John is a nursing assistant in a hospital. In the past, he has cared for patients from the Middle East who were very vocal about every pain or discomfort they felt. So, when his new patient, a man from the Middle East, begins to moan and groan constantly about his pain, John doesn't report it. (In his mind, he stereotypes his patient as a noisy, grumbling Middle Easterner.) But, John is making a big mistake by not paying attention to his patient as an individual!*

**Prejudice.** When we have a *prejudice* about people, we judge them before the facts are known. (Sometimes, even when we know the

truth, we still hang onto our false beliefs.)

- Example: *Jim is a home health supervisor. He grew up believing that fat people are lazy. Currently, Jim's best employee is overweight—and not the least bit lazy. Yet, Jim still doesn't like to hire people who are heavy. He is prejudiced against heavy people.*



**Be careful not to stereotype people based on their appearance or clothing.**

**Values.** When people see a particular behavior or tradition as important, they are said to *value* it. Each culture has its own set of values.

- Example: *Most white Americans value privacy, especially when they are sick. Often, they will pay more for a private room in a hospital and probably want to have a lot of private time. However, people from other cultures—such as Asians and Hispanics—tend to stick closely to sick family members. They put more value on the strength of the family than they do on privacy.*

## Health Beliefs From Around the World

When you were growing up, what did you learn about:

- How to stay healthy?
- How to know when you were sick?
- How to behave when you were ill?
- What to do to get healthy again?

The answers to these questions are some of your beliefs about health and disease. People from other cultures have health beliefs about a variety of topics, including:

### The Cause of Disease

- Most Americans believe that germs cause disease—because this is what scientists say is true. But not all cultures share this belief.
- Other cultures feel that people get sick if their bodies are not in balance...or their souls are lost, weak or stolen...or because they deserve a disease for something they've done wrong.

### Blood Transfusions & Blood Tests

- Some religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses,

believe that blood transfusions are forbidden by God—*even if the procedure would save someone's life.*

- In some cultures, people refuse to have their blood drawn. They're afraid of becoming weak or of losing their souls if even a small amount of blood is taken from their bodies.

### Prayer

- In some cultures, people believe that God will heal them if they pray hard enough—and if they *deserve* to get better.
- Keep in mind that some people are in the habit of praying at certain times each day. And, they may want to get into a special position to pray.

### Sacred Symbols

- Many cultures encourage the use of objects to protect people from illness. These sacred objects include charms, necklaces, rosaries, bracelets, pieces of clothing, special candles and papers with bible verses written on them.

### Evil Eye

- Belief in the "evil eye" is common in many cultures across South America, the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia.
- People who believe in the evil eye are afraid that they can become sick if someone looks at them the wrong way. (However, most cultures have ways of protecting themselves from the power of the evil eye.)



**In China, the numbers 8 and 9 are considered lucky. The number 8 means "wealth" and the number 9 means "long life".**

### Lucky & Unlucky Numbers

- In the Chinese and Japanese language, the word for the number 4 is pronounced the same as the word for "death". So, for example, a Chinese man may feel unlucky if he's admitted to the hospital in Room 404.
- Other cultures, such as the Navaho, believe that the number 4 is lucky. For example, a Navaho woman may believe that a medicine will do more good if taken four times a day rather than three.

## More Cultural Health Beliefs

### **Hair**

- Some cultures, such as the Sikh religion, forbid people to cut or shave any of their body hair.
- There are Native American cultures that believe it's a sign of good health for a child to have long, thick hair. If a child's hair is cut or shaved, they believe the child may weaken or die.

### **Bathing**

- People from some cultures believe that a layer of dirt helps protect them from illness. Bathing too frequently is seen as unhealthy.
- In other cultures, bathing is a kind of ritual that must be done at certain times of the day, week or month.

### **Dietary Practices**

- During the Muslim religious festival, Ramadan, followers are forbidden to eat from sunrise to sunset.
- Orthodox Jews will not eat pork or shellfish, nor will they mix meat and dairy foods in the same meal.

- In some countries, such as Pakistan, people classify foods as *hot* or *cold* depending on how each food affects the body. For example, Pakistanis believe that beef and potatoes make their bodies hot inside, so they only eat them in winter. In summer, they eat "cooling" foods, such as chicken and fruit.
- People who practice the Hindu religion are forbidden to eat beef.
- People from different cultures grow up with their own food likes and dislikes. For example, Asian people usually enjoy having rice every day. And, people who live near water tend to eat a lot of seafood.

### **Modesty**

- Many cultures value modesty, and some have strict rules about it. For example, in some Asian cultures, doctors only touch female patients when taking their pulse.
- For Southeast Asians, the area between the waist and knees is especially private and must be covered at all times.

- Hispanic women also tend to be very modest about any kind of bodily function.

### **Folk Medicine**

- Every culture has its own beliefs about how to treat disease. Many of these "folk" treatments have been used for centuries (and probably with some success).
- Many Asians believe that rubbing the body with a coin until red marks appear will cure a person's disease.
- "Cupping" is another kind of folk medicine that is practiced in Asia, Latin America and parts of Europe. It involves heating a glass and placing it on the body. This creates a "vacuum" under the glass which pulls the disease out of the body (and creates a red mark on the skin).
- American doctors treat a high fever by trying to cool the person down. But, in the Japanese and Hispanic cultures, most people believe that a fever should be treated by piling blankets on the person until a sweat breaks out.



**People in many cultures rely on faith healers rather than physicians to cure their illnesses.**

## Let's Look At Dementia...

Every culture has different beliefs about health and disease. To illustrate this point, let's take a look at how a few cultures within the United States *tend* to view a particular health condition: dementia.

Dementia is a very common diagnosis, but the way people approach this condition depends partly on their individual

cultural beliefs.

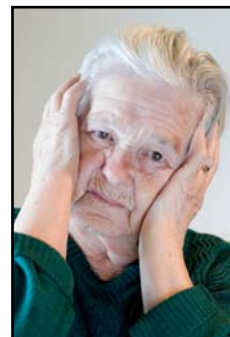
Our focus will be on *four* different cultural groups:

- African Americans
- Hispanic Americans
- Japanese Americans
- Chinese Americans

However, please remember that we are discussing this issue in

general terms. Not everyone in the above four cultural groups has the same beliefs.

*This information on cultural beliefs and dementia has been gathered from a variety of research studies and surveys. It is adapted here from information found on the Ethnic Elders Care Network.*



**Dementia affects people of all races and cultures. Worldwide, there is a new case of dementia every seven seconds!**

## What Do African Americans Believe About Dementia?

***Instead of using a medical diagnosis of dementia to describe someone's condition, some African Americans prefer to use terms like "his mind is slipping" or "she's out of her head today" or "he's just not with it".***

- Unfortunately, dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease, is up to four times more common among African Americans than among Caucasians. Yet, many African Americans believe that dementia is a normal part of aging rather than an illness.
- They tend to blame the dementia on:
  - Stress.
  - Excess anxiety.
  - Smoking.
  - Alcohol abuse.
  - God's will.
- African Americans also tend to blame heredity, believing that dementia runs in families, especially among people who worry a lot or who have "spells".
- Because many African American families value their elders, they are more likely to care for relatives with dementia at home—rather than putting them in a health care facility.
- African American friends, neighbors and church members tend to come together as a community to help a family deal with dementia.



**African Americans tend not to be concerned about dementia until the symptoms are advanced.**





Many Hispanic Americans believe that stress plays a factor in the development of dementia.



## How Do Hispanic Americans View Dementia?

- Many Hispanic Americans view dementia as a mental illness—something that can bring shame, embarrassment and stigma to the entire family.
- Because of shameful feelings, some Hispanic people may try to hide or deny the memory and behavior issues that come with dementia.
- In Hispanic American families, it is most often the female members who care for a person with dementia. If there is no female relative available, then a male relative will be called on to help.
- Even when dealing with dementia, Hispanic Americans tend to avoid seeking help from people outside the family. They believe that to do so would be sharing a shameful family secret—and would put their responsibilities and burdens on the shoulders of others.

## What About Japanese Americans?

- Many Japanese American families believe that dementia is *unavoidable* and is simply a normal part of getting older.

- Others see the symptoms of dementia (such as paranoia and delusions) as a form of mental illness. In fact, the word for dementia in

Japanese is **kichigai** which means *crazy* or *insane*.

- Japanese people with dementia tend to be cared for by their families.

**Japanese Americans tend to keep quiet about a family member with dementia. To discuss it might cause them to “lose face” in the community.**

## Dementia Beliefs Among Chinese Americans

- Some Chinese families do not feel that the symptoms of dementia require medical attention.
- Like the Japanese, some Chinese Americans believe that dementia is a shameful mental illness, similar to schizophrenia. They may hide their sick relative from the community and avoid sharing their “family secret” with others.
- Many Chinese Americans believe that people develop dementia because it is their fate to do so. They feel that the condition may be “payback” for the sins of the family.
- Some Chinese Americans feel that dementia comes from an imbalance between the body’s two energies—the “yin” and the “yang”.



Traditionally, Chinese people with dementia are cared for by the oldest son and his wife.

## Other Cultural Differences

### Language

- Obviously, people from different cultures may not speak English, or they may have learned English as a second language.
- English, like every language, has its own expressions that may not be understood by people from other cultures—even if they have studied English. For example, if you tell people from another culture that your client is “getting cold feet” about having surgery, they’ll probably tell you to put socks on your client’s feet!
- Slang words can also be difficult to understand, even by people who speak the same language. For example, if you told a British woman that the nurse is going to give her a shot in the fanny, she would be shocked. (*In England, South Africa and Australia, “fanny” is slang for the genitals.*)
- Any language can be confusing when the same word has two different meanings. For example, in Mexico, the word “horita” means “right now”. In Puerto Rico, the same word means “in an hour or so.”
- Many Asian languages do not use pronouns (like “he” and “she”). So, a Japanese coworker might refer to every client as “he”. This can be confusing!
- In some cultures, silence is an important part of communicating. For example, Navaho people use periods of silence as time to think about what they want to say. So, if they are asked a question, they might be silent until they’ve thought about their answer.
- In some cultures, such as in the Middle East, men are seen as dominant over women. They are used to giving orders to women and having them obey right away. This may cause communication problems between a male Middle Eastern client and a female American nurse aide.

### Time Orientation

- Keep in mind that people from different cultures may view time differently. For example, some cultures are *past-oriented*, meaning that they tend to focus on the “good old days”. Traditions and history are valued the most. People who

are past-oriented may feel that health problems are better solved with old home remedies rather than new medications.

- Other cultures tend to focus on the *future*. This means that people think in terms of what’s ahead of them. They tend to value *new* drugs, *new* surgeries, and the *prevention* of future health problems. People who are future-oriented like to follow schedules and are often very prompt. For example, if they make an appointment for 3:15, they’ll be there on time (or even early).
- Some cultures tend to focus more on the *present*. For them, concentrating on the here-and-now is most important. They may not see the value of planning ahead and they don’t live their lives watching the clock. Sometimes, present-oriented people may be tardy or may fail to meet a time deadline. This doesn’t mean they are being thoughtless or lazy. It’s just part of their culture. They were raised to live fully in the present and usually don’t consider being late a problem.



**People from every country in the world have moved to the United States. There are more than 100 ethnic groups and more than 200 Native American groups living in the U.S. today.**



## *Other Cultural Differences, continued*

### Eye Contact

- In the American culture, looking someone in the eye is considered polite. But, in other cultures, direct eye contact is disrespectful.
- People in some cultures believe that you can harm someone—or steal his spirit—by looking him directly in the eye.
- Eye contact between members of the opposite sex may be seen as a sexual invitation.

### Gestures

- The way people move their hands, arms and bodies can mean different things to different people. For example, think about the hand gesture that means “OK” to Americans. In Japan, this gesture means “money”. To a French person, it means “zero”. To people from Mexico and Brazil, it is an obscene gesture.
- If you motion with your first finger for someone to “come

here,” your gesture might be misunderstood. For example, in the Philippines, this gesture is only used to call animals, not people.

- A simple “thumbs up” gesture is a good thing to most Americans. But, to people from Iran, it’s the same thing as giving someone “the finger.”

### Personal Space

- People from different cultures have their own attitudes and behaviors about personal space. For example, most white Americans are “territorial” about the space right around their bodies. They feel uncomfortable if strangers stand closer than two or three feet to them.
- Some cultures put more value on the personal space around them, and for others, it’s not an important issue. For example, Hispanics tend to be comfortable with

people standing within 18 inches of them, while Japanese people prefer a distance of 3 to 6 feet.

- When people are sick, they tend to allow strangers to come closer than normal.

### Touching

- In general, Asians are taught that touching in public—even a handshake—is disrespectful. They prefer to greet each other with a nod or a bow.
- Hispanic people tend to enjoy greeting each other with a casual hug.
- Orthodox Jews and Muslims may have rules against being touched by people of the opposite sex.



**How do you feel when people “invade” your personal space?**

**America is changing. The white majority is getting smaller...and older in age. The African-American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American populations are young and growing. Cultural diversity is a normal part of life in our country!**



## Working with People From Other Cultures

- In order to work with people from different cultures, you need to understand your own values and beliefs. What do you consider “normal”? How accepting are you of people with different beliefs?
- It also helps to be honest with yourself about any prejudices you may have developed over the years. Keep in mind that most prejudices are based on fear...fear of the unknown. The more we learn about different cultures, the more we'll be able to understand others.
- Be sure to ask how your clients want to be addressed. Sometimes, first and last names may be in a different order than you're used to. For example, if your client is an Egyptian man named Aziz Mohamad, you should call him Mr. Aziz...not Mr. Mohamad.
- Be honest if you're not sure how to pronounce someone's name. Your effort to get it right will be appreciated! (And, if clients mispronounce *your* name, let them know.)
- Try not to “guess” where your clients are from. If you're wrong, you might offend them. For example, if you ask a Korean woman if she's from China, she'll probably be insulted.
- If your clients are wearing anything unusual, keep in mind that they may be doing so for religious or cultural reasons. You may see a thread woven into their hair, a medicine bundle on a string around their neck or a ribbon wrapped around their wrist. Don't remove any item from your client without their permission!
- Give your clients private time as needed so that they may pray. Supporting their spiritual needs will go a long way toward helping them get well.
- Before you report that your client has no appetite, make sure he or she is able to eat the foods being offered. (Remember that in some cultures people are forbidden to eat certain foods.) Do your best to support the dietary needs and preferences of all your clients.
- Be patient with family members. Depending on their culture, it may be very important for them to take part in their loved one's care. Allow them to help as much as possible—while still getting your job done.
- Sometimes, it may seem that family members become more demanding than your clients! But, keep in mind that many people become demanding when they feel scared, helpless or out of control. Try giving the family small, helpful tasks they can do such as rubbing lotion on the client's hands and feet.



**It's part of human nature to develop some prejudices. It's how you *deal* with them that's important.**



## More Practical Tips For You...

- Keep in mind that people from different cultures have different attitudes about toileting. For example, in some Asian countries, toilets are level with the ground. To have a bowel movement, people squat over the hole. So, people from Asia may not be comfortable using a bedpan in bed. Don't be surprised if you find them squatting over the bedpan on the floor. Remember...to them, this is normal behavior.
  - If you feel uncertain about how to behave around people from other cultures, wait and see what *they* do. Then, do the same!
  - Don't take it personally if a client asks for a different caregiver. For example, a Muslim man will probably feel more comfortable with a male caregiver, and an Orthodox Jewish woman will prefer a woman's help with her personal care.
  - Clients who are present-oriented may not be very good at planning ahead. They may need extra reminders about taking their medications on time.
  - In some cultures, saying "please" and "thank you" are not necessary at the workplace. You may think that people are being rude, but to them it's just normal. Don't take it personally.
  - Your workplace probably has a policy against taking gifts from clients or their family members. But, clients from other cultures may want to give gifts to the people who care for them. You may insult them if you refuse their gift. If so, be sure you tell your supervisor about the gift. The best solution may be to share it with your coworkers.
  - Americans tend to speak loudly and to look people in the eye when we talk to them.
- People from other cultures may find our manner disrespectful. You might consider lowering your voice and giving them plenty of time to speak.
- Keep in mind that some of your clients and coworkers have been discriminated against at some point. They may be very sensitive and defensive due to these painful experiences in their past. Be patient and understanding.
  - It's *impossible* to remember all the specific differences for every culture. Just keep an open mind and treat each person at work as an individual.



**Encouraging cultural diversity is not new. Back in the 1890's, a nurse named Florence Nightingale taught British health care workers about the health beliefs of their Indian patients.**

**We hope this inservice has increased your awareness of your own cultural beliefs and values. All people must practice in order to achieve "cultural competence"—and the first step is understanding our own feelings about different cultures.**





*Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time*

## A Professional Growth Module: Understanding Cultural Diversity

**Are you "In the Know" about cultural diversity? Circle the correct answer or fill in the blank. Then check your answers with your supervisor.**

**1. TRUE or FALSE**

*Beliefs* are truths that most people from a particular culture agree on.

**2. TRUE or FALSE**

If you generalize about people, it means you are suffering from culture shock.

**3. TRUE or FALSE**

Most cultures outside the U.S. have false beliefs about how to stay healthy.

**4. TRUE or FALSE**

When caring for a client, it's important to consider his or her cultural beliefs.

**5. People from different cultures may misunderstand \_\_\_\_\_ gestures that are commonly used by Americans.**

**6. TRUE or FALSE**

To be a good nursing assistant, you need to agree with all different cultural beliefs.

**7. Most prejudices are based on \_\_\_\_\_.**

**8. TRUE or FALSE**

Cultural diversity is a new concept that was developed within the past twenty years.

**9. People from some cultures find direct \_\_\_\_\_ contact offensive.**

**10. TRUE or FALSE**

The United States is an homogenous society consisting of people from more than 100 ethnic groups.

EMPLOYEE NAME  
*(Please print):*

\_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

- *I understand the information presented in this inservice.*
- *I have completed this inservice and answered at least eight of the test questions correctly.*

EMPLOYEE SIGNATURE:

\_\_\_\_\_

SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE:

\_\_\_\_\_

### Inservice Credit:

<input type="checkbox"/> Self Study	1 hour
<input type="checkbox"/> Group Study	1 hour

**File completed test  
in employee's  
personnel file.**