



# Why culturally competent care is important and how to find it

When it comes to communication, shared context often offers a much quicker and easier path to understanding. The same can be true in health care situations when clinicians and patients interact. Language barriers, traditions, values and beliefs can all affect how someone explains and interprets information. With this in mind, increasingly, cultural education for health care professionals is considered an important component of improving the quality of care delivered to diverse patient populations.

For patients, seeking the care of a culturally competent health care professional does not mean finding someone who represents the same race, ethnicity, sex or anything else.

Rather, it means working with a provider who has the ability to effectively deliver health care services that meet a patient's social, cultural and linguistic needs. This could range from explaining diagnoses and treatment options in terms a nonclinical person can understand, to being keenly aware of how people with different backgrounds might explain the symptoms of the same condition differently, or knowing the conditions a person may be at higher risk for given their genetic makeup and/or lifestyle, among other factors.

It also means knowing and respecting from a human and clinical perspective how social determinants of health — the conditions in the environments where someone is born, lives, learns, works, plays and ages — can affect a person's overall health, functioning and quality of life outcomes and risks.<sup>1</sup>

So, for example, if you are a person of color coping with race-based trauma, a culturally competent mental health professional will have an understanding of racism, be comfortable working with people of the same or a different

race, and be knowledgeable and trained in the social and clinical effects of racial trauma.

Cultural competence is important for many reasons. Research has established that socio-cultural differences between patients and health care professionals influence many aspects of the medical encounter.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it can impact the patient's experience, how well and whether the patient follows the clinician's guidance, and the overall effectiveness of the diagnosis and treatment. For example:

- Patients respond better when care instructions are delivered in their own language and their cultural background is taken into account
- Knowledge of, and sensitivity to, cultural issues can impact the way patients share their medical needs, and how clinicians can enhance communication, diagnosis and treatment
- For all patients, awareness of cultural subtleties by physicians and other health professionals can help improve patient care

Increasingly, health systems and clinics are implementing initiatives to bridge cultural gaps. This includes incorporating cultural diversity and inclusion training into programs for medical and mental health care professionals, offering language interpreters, and making information available in multiple languages.

### **Finding a provider who's right for you**

Following is an abbreviated list of tips from NAMI for finding a culturally competent provider:<sup>3</sup>

Research providers:

- Contact providers or agencies from your same cultural background or look for providers and agencies that have worked with people who have a similar cultural background
- Ask trusted friends and family for recommendations
- Look online or ask for referrals from cultural organizations in your community

Ask providers these questions:

- Are you familiar with my community's beliefs, values and attitudes toward health care and/or mental health? If not, are you willing to learn about my cultural background and respect my perspective?
- Do you have experience treating people from my cultural background?
- Have you had cultural competence training?
- Are you or members of your staff bilingual?
- How would you include aspects of my cultural identity, such as age, faith, gender or sexual orientation, into my care?

Other things you can do:

- Tell the provider about traditions, values and beliefs that are important to you
- Tell the provider what role you want your family to play in your treatment
- Learn about your condition, particularly how it affects people from your culture or community
- Look around the provider's office for signs of inclusion. Who works there? Does the waiting room have magazines, signs and pamphlets for you and your community?

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# Strategies for coping with racial trauma

For someone who has experienced trauma, it can be difficult to get through a day without something — a smell, a sound, a voice, an image — triggering a flashback. In those moments, the person feels the emotional and physical distress they felt during the event.

For people of color, the many overt and subtle forms of racism they endure continuously is traumatic, and can manifest in race-based traumatic stress (RBTS) with symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder that threaten their health and well-being.

Especially if left untreated, RBTS can lead to anxiety, depression, chronic stress, high-blood pressure, substance abuse, among other conditions. Long-term, heightened stress and anxiety also can compromise a person's immune and digestive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and lead to mental and physical exhaustion.

It's a lot to take in, and difficult for anyone to cope with, much less overcome, without help.

If this sounds familiar to you, below are some self-help strategies to help protect yourself against the mentally, emotionally and physically draining effects of living with discrimination. There also are professional resources available to support you.

**Reach out to others for support.** Sometimes when people are in pain, they isolate themselves. But social support from people you trust can be an important resource. Connect with empathetic and understanding loved ones who you will listen and understand what you're going through.

**Join a peer group.** Group discussion can help you realize you are not alone in your experiences, reactions and emotions. Community support group meetings led by appropriately culturally competent and trained professionals can be especially helpful if your personal support systems are limited. Consider connecting through digital apps and phone if you're one of few people like you in your community.

**Channel your emotions.** Whether you're feeling sad, powerless, angry or any other intense emotion, it can be helpful to direct your feelings into something that helps you create meaningful change, however small. For example, join an activist organization, volunteer as a youth mentor, or something else that interests you.

**Communicate your experience.** Another way to channel emotion is to express what you are feeling and share your perspective in ways that feel comfortable to you. For example, tap into creative outlets like the visual or performance arts or writing.

**Take a break.** Find a safe place or way to at least momentarily get away from the swirl of headlines and acute awareness that racism is real. Maybe put on headphones and close your eyes while you listen to your favorite music. Cook a delicious meal that reminds you of good times. Go for a walk or birdwatching. Play a sport you love, or try a new exercise class. Whatever it is, give yourself a break.

Also consider using relaxation techniques, like breathing exercises and practicing mindfulness, such as yoga, journaling or meditation, to help relieve stress.

**Mind your health.** Taking care of yourself is an important part of coping with racism, getting through times of overwhelming stress, and steeling yourself for the challenges to come. Eating nutritious foods, getting enough sleep and exercising regularly can help strengthen your body and reduce feelings of anxiety or depression.

**Nurture hope.** Even in the most harrowing times, find reasons to be optimistic. Think about positive experiences you've had to remember good things do and will happen. Acknowledge even small signs of change.

### **Get help**

Seek out a mental health professional who has a working understanding of racism, is comfortable working with people of the same or a different race, and who is knowledgeable and trained in the clinical effects of racial trauma. A culturally competent provider will understand the role that cultural differences play in the diagnosis of a condition, and can incorporate cultural needs and differences into your care.

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# Mental health conditions do not discriminate

Often, people are afraid to talk about mental health because there are many misconceptions about mental illnesses. It's important to learn the facts to stop discrimination and alleviate the stigma.

- Mental illnesses are common — one in four people experience some kind of mental health problem within the course of a year.
- Mental illnesses do not discriminate — they can affect anyone, and are a product of the interaction of biological, psychological and social factors. Research has shown genetic and biological factors are associated with schizophrenia, depression and alcoholism. Social influences, such as loss of a loved one or a job, can also contribute to the development of various disorders.
- People with mental illnesses can and do lead active, productive lives. Studies show that most people with mental illnesses get better, and many recover completely — meaning they are able to live, work, learn and participate fully in their communities. For others, recovery means the reduction or complete remission of symptoms.

The good news is, there are more treatments, strategies and community supports than ever before, and even more are on the horizon. Treatment varies depending on the individual. A lot of people work with therapists, counselors, their peers, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses and social workers in their recovery process. They also use self-help strategies and community supports. Often these methods are combined with some of the most advanced medications available.

## Asking for help

Stigma surrounding mental health can make it difficult to have conversations about it. You might feel uncomfortable asking for help. There's no "correct" way to do it — it's about reaching out and telling someone you trust that you need support.

- When deciding who to speak with, consider the people in your life who you trust to confide in and who have shown empathy and understanding. Is there a family member, close friend, teacher, mentor, or someone else who you respect and feel comfortable opening up to?
- If a face-to-face conversation feels too intimidating, try reaching out to someone via text. The mode of communication shouldn't be a barrier to asking for help and connecting with someone you trust. Consider setting the stage by mentioning there's something you'd like to talk about and then arrange a time.
- Don't feel like you need to express everything you're feeling over the course of one conversation. Talking about what you're going through is often a process that takes place over many discussions.
- You also can keep it simple and tell the other person that you're feeling badly and would like help. Consider what kind of support you prefer. Do you need help finding a professional to speak with, would you like

someone to accompany you to an appointment, or are you just looking for a listening ear? Let others know what they can do to help.

Keep in mind, in some situations, you may not get the response you were looking for. Mental health can be a difficult topic for some people to talk about. This may have to do with a lack of information, cultural aspects, their background, or something else altogether. The important thing is that you don't let this stop you from seeking help elsewhere.

Speaking with trusted friends and family about your mental health is a good place to start. Eventually, you will likely want to speak with a professional, as they're trained to help you navigate challenges. It's important to build a strong support network that includes a mix of loved ones as well as professionals.

If you find yourself needing immediate help, reach out to someone you trust, visit an emergency room, or contact a crisis hotline.

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