Cultural Sensitivity

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In our role as health care professionals, we meet many different types of people. Some have a different cultural background to us. In order to achieve a good dialog, it is essential to seek knowledge and understanding about things that are important to the person in front of you. It is the responsibility of the health care professional to accommodate to the needs of the client and not the other way around. The fact that more and more of our clients in health care come from many different cultural backgrounds presents an ever-increasing challenge in many societies.

What factors are important when meeting different types of people?

An important paper written by Cynthia Foronda, has addressed the issue of how we can become more culture-sensitive as health care professionals. The paper is called “A concept analysis of Cultural Sensitivity”, published in the Journal of Transcultural Nursing in April 2008. In this paper, she analyses and discusses how the art of communication can be used to enhance cultural sensitivity within a health care setting.

In her paper, Foronda defines culture sensitivity in this way: Cultural sensitivity is employing one's knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect and tailoring, utilizing awareness to self and others, when encountering a diverse group or individual.

So what do these five key words mean to the health care professional?

The first important aspect is

Knowledge:

Cultural norms, values, and practices, including health beliefs vary significantly between different families, as well as between different cultural and socio-demographic groups. Gaining cultural knowledge means to become familiar with these differences.

One way we as health care professionals gain cultural knowledge and to improve skills in cultural competence is to read more about these issues in the literature.

However, spending time with people with different ethnic backgrounds within your own client-population is also a way to achieve a greater understanding of cultural differences.

We cannot be experts about every culture, but knowing that culture differs and having an understanding of one or more cultures than our own, might well be just as important as having a detailed knowledge of every culture.
Increasing our awareness level may give us a keener interest in the people we meet, such that we meet these people with more openness and understanding. This will make us, the health care professionals, better prepared to interact with a diverse population.

**Consideration:**

To be considerate means to pay regard to the needs or feelings of others. Another way to describe this is to give careful thought, having concern for or caring for others. This is also a very important aspect of culture sensitivity. If we are considerate to the needs of the client, we cannot make stereotype assumptions or create stereotype pictures about the other person. Instead, we will try to find out what is important for her or him and consider their individual needs very carefully.

To evaluate the needs of the individual, it is important to ask open-ended questions. This enables the individual to reflect on their situation and provide you with information for further dialog.

So, to fully meet the needs of a person in front of us we must take an open, sensitive and caring approach.

**Understanding:**

Understanding is the third aspect of culture sensitivity. This may be a difficult word to grasp as it can be interpreted as having knowledge. However, in this context it means something deeper, that we try to understand the importance of the other person’s values and experiences. Health care professionals should have an appreciation of and try to grasp the effect of, or the importance of, another person’s values or experiences.

A desire to achieve an understanding of the other person is the key to becoming more sensitive to other cultures. If we do not have this willingness to see the other person’s perspective, communication will be more difficult. Should there be one word to remember regarding how to be sensitive to other cultures, the word would be “understanding”, the willingness to see the other person’s perspective.

**Respect:**

This is closely linked to the forth aspect that is also a fundamental component of cultural sensitivity: Having respect.

It is always important to show respect for another person, even if we ourselves have different values or understanding of a situation. We may not necessarily have the same point of view or agree on everything, but through respect, we acknowledge the other person’s values. For instance, if we are about to suggest some change that may be unheard of for the other person; respect will allow us to meet the individual with an open mind and will maintain the important ethical aspects of being a health professional.
By developing both respect and acceptance we will establish a social and cultural foundation to create an integrated society.

**Tailoring:**

The final attribute is tailoring.

Tailoring can be defined as to make, alter or adapt our behavior to meet the needs of an individual or a group. Tailoring can occur in several ways; by how we speak to others, how we approach others, or by selecting the most appropriate and acceptable treatment for them. Tailoring is a manner of providing care or other aspects of the content of what we do.

Thus, by demonstrating a genuine interest in the client, asking about their lives and by interacting with a balance of listening, observing, and asking nonjudgmental questions we have the chance to obtain the positive consequence of cultural sensitivity and give the best health care to our clients.

So all together, we can become more culture sensitive in our practice as health care workers by employing our knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect and by tailoring to the needs of our users. By these means we can attain a better dialogue and mutual understanding with pregnant women and parents of preschool children in nutrition consultations.

**References:**