

Cultural Competence & Mental Health

Center for Personal Development
Saint Peter's College

What is Cultural Competence?

Cultural competence is the willingness and ability of a system to value the importance of culture in the delivery of services to all segments of the population. Cultural competence is especially important in mental health because often culture determines whether people seek help in the first place, what types of help they seek, and to what degree they attach a stigma to mental illness.

Barriers to Services

Many barriers to accessing mental health services exist across all populations, but minorities experience special hardships in receiving the proper treatment for their mental health disabilities. Some of these are:

- Mistrust and fear of treatment
- Racism
- Discrimination by individuals as well as institutions
- Language and communication problems
- Different cultural ideas about illnesses and health
- Lack of or insufficient health insurance

Mental Health in Minority Populations

Current studies show that...

- Due to lack of affordable health care and stigmas associated with mental illness, *African Americans* are less likely to seek treatment at the onset of emotional problems – they wait until they are in a critical state to seek help. They are also over represented in vulnerable, high-need populations because of homelessness, incarceration, and (for children) placement in foster care.
- *Hispanic American* youth tend to show higher rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms, as well as greater suicidal tendencies than the norm. Hindrances to Latinos receiving services are lack of medical insurance, and language barriers encountered when attempting to access services.
- *Asian Americans* are more likely to drop out of mental health services after their initial contact, or to prematurely stop all mainstream services. Such under use of the mental health system is thought to stem from the shame, stigma and other cultural reactions to mental illness still prevalent in this group. Asian Americans, in addition to being unaware of the availability of local mental health services, are more likely to seek culturally inherent care such as herbal remedies, acupuncture, and other cultural forms of healing.

Targeting At-Risk Behaviors

Given the diversity of students on St. Peter's College campus and the growing mental health needs of the college student population at large, the Center for Personal Development realizes the importance of offering culturally competent mental health services. A major component of the Center's operation is the Peer Educator program where SPC students are trained in recognizing and responding to at-risk behaviors in their peers. If you are interested in learning more about cultural competency, at-risk behaviors, or the peer educator program please contact the Center for Personal Development at (201)761-6420.