An Introduction to Cultural Awareness for CNAs

One (1.0) Contact Hour

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Purpose and Objectives
The purpose of this course is to prepare CNAs to care for patients from different cultures.

*After successful completion of this course, you will be able to:*

1. Explain why cultural sensitivity is important for CNAs.
2. Describe the role of the CNA in providing culturally sensitive care.
3. Identify how the CNA can increase personal cultural awareness.
4. Describe situations that involve cultural conflicts.

Definitions

*Culture:*
Refers to norms and practices of a particular group that are learned and shared and guide thinking, decisions, and actions.

*Cultural Values:*
The individual’s preferred way of acting or knowing something that is continued over a period of time and which governs actions.

*Culturally diverse nursing care:*
An optimal mode of health care delivery, where the care provided is culturally appropriate and includes an individual's cultural values, beliefs, and practices.

Introduction
This course is a demanding one. It asks you to identify your biases so that you can more easily accept patients from different cultural backgrounds. This will make you a better CNA.

This course gives you tools to help you overcome any biases that you may have.

*Did You Know?*
To be culturally competent, the nurse needs to learn how to mix a little cultural understanding with the nursing care offered (Transcultural Nursing, 2014).
What is Culture and Cultural Insensitivity?
Culture is a way of life. It is a mixture of language, religion, history, practices, and values. The United States is made up of many different cultures. Lack of knowledge about different cultures can put your patients at risk for substandard care.

You are probably familiar with stereotyping, prejudice or bias and racism.

Here is an example of cultural insensitivity:

A nurse is assigned an elderly Chinese man with severe third and fourth degree burns covering a quarter of his body. She asks the patient if he wants a pain shot before starting to change his dressings. According to Chinese etiquette it is impolite to accept anything offered the first time, so the patient refuses the shot. The nurse is surprised but assumes Asians are just stoic. She thinks perhaps they have higher pain tolerance. However, during the dressing change the patient grimaces with pain. He requires emergency medication when his blood pressure rises dangerously high.

Cultural Differences between the General Population and the Nursing Population
There is a different mix of cultural groups between the general population and that of healthcare professionals. While one-third of the general population in the United States is minority, only one-quarter of nurses are minorities (Carthon et al., 2014).

This makes cultural awareness an important priority when providing care to patients with a culture different from your own.

Test Yourself
Cultural diversity within the hospital and the general population is the same.

A. True
B. False

Answer: False. The mix of races and ethnic groups are different.

Basic Concepts
Adapting to different cultural beliefs and practices requires flexibility and a respect for others viewpoints.

Cultural competence means to really listen to the patient, to find out and learn about the patient's beliefs of health and illness.

To provide culturally appropriate care we need to know and to understand culturally influenced health behaviors (Transcultural Nursing, 2014a).

There is a difference between stereotyping and generalizations:

- **Stereotyping** is a commonly held public belief about a group of people that can negatively influence the way in which you relate to a person. Stereotyping is a **negative act** and should
Generalization
In studying cultures you may come up with a list of generalizations. These may or may not be true for your patients. It is up to you to find out.

If you don't check it out, you may become guilty of stereotyping, which is assuming that the generalizations for a particular group of people apply to your particular patient.

Here are some examples (Manchester Health Department & Baylor University, n.d.):

**Generalizations about Hispanics**
- They are Catholic.
- They are emotionally expressive.

**Generalizations about Arabs**
- They must pray five times a day on a mat.
- Their honor is dependent on upholding female modesty.

**Generalizations about Asians**
- They believe pain is to be accepted and tolerated.
- They use a traditional healing method of rubbing a coin over the body.

**Generalizations about African Americans**
- They have great respect for elders.
- They use prayer as a common way to heal illness.

**Steps to Providing Culturally Sensitive Care**
Your goal as a CNA is to provide individualized care. This care is not based on generalizations about race and ethnic background. You must not assume that a patient’s needs are the same as others from a certain culture. You cannot assume that all patients from a particular culture have the same needs. You need to adapt your care to what you learn about your patient as an individual. However, learning about different cultures gives you a great starting point.

There are four steps to improving your skills in working with patients from various cultural backgrounds:
• Become aware of your own biases.
• Learn about cultures different than your own.
• Develop new ways to deal with differences that impact the care you give.

Self-awareness requires a willingness to look at ourselves with honesty. As humans, we all have “blind spots.” We believe our cultural beliefs and values are the norm, but this is not true for everyone. We need to keep an open mind and force ourselves to become more aware of other cultural practices.

Studying other cultures is a starting point. Your facility may have resources on other cultures available to you. There are nursing organizations dedicated to teaching others about cultural issues. You can find information about different cultures on the Internet.

Remember that cultures are constantly changing. They change with each new generation, and change over time. They are influenced by other cultures. This is another reason that you cannot generalize about a particular culture.

**Developing Cultural Awareness**

• Ask your patients about their preferences. In most cases they will be happy to teach you about their culture.

Your newly admitted patient is an elderly Chinese man. Consider asking him about his preferences for diet. He might prefer a traditional Chinese diet, or he may enjoy “American” food.

• Use the family as a resource. They can assist you in understanding the patient's preferences, both related to culture and in general.

Developing cultural awareness is very important. It is important that you learn about different cultures and do not assume the characteristics of a cultural group apply to everyone with that cultural background.

• Awareness is one of the keys to caring for patients from different cultures. Simply recognizing that cultures are different is the first step in the process.

You start to notice a trend about your Black patients. Many of them seem to bring their bible to the hospital. You are beginning to develop awareness about a culture. Many Blacks have a strong faith and may be more up front about their beliefs than members of your own culture.

You are caring for a Hispanic woman who speaks little English. There seems to be at least one family member around all the time. Ask the family member to help you communicate with the patient and learn more about her likes, dislikes, abilities, and other preferences regarding her care.

• Use other staff members as a resource. All of us come from various cultural backgrounds. Ask other staff members about their own cultural backgrounds or about what they have learned about different cultures. Your co-workers may have a wealth of information.

You have recently moved to the southwest U.S. from the northeast. You have a large number of Native American patients on your unit. One of your team members is Native American. You know she...
was raised on an Indian reservation, but you have never asked her about that experience. You decide to ask her about her experience and to give you some tips about the culture she was raised in.

When Cultural Practices Interfere with Healthcare
Cultural practices can sometimes interfere with the care of your patient in an acute care setting. The CNA must be aware of cultural norms that may interfere with the nursing care of a patient. Cultural awareness does not mean that you ignore what is unhealthy. A hypertensive patient from any culture needs to learn about avoiding foods with salt in them. Your teaching may differ based upon his particular food likes and dislikes.

It is important for the CNA to refrain from judging other cultures. It is human nature to believe that your way is the best way. But it is not the only way. Others may arrive at the same destination using a different path. As long as a particular activity doesn’t harm the patient or others, consider letting your patient maintain his cultural identity.

*Ignoring a patient's culture leads to the provision of a lower standard of care.*

Cultural Situations Affecting Patient Care
Since you work so closely with patients, you may be the one who first spots a cultural situation that may affect patient care. You may discover that a patient who seems uncooperative may not understand you. You may be asking him to do something that is considered “taboo” in his culture. Listen to what the patient is saying and also observe the patient’s body language.

The patient's family may also do something that unintentionally impacts the patient's care. The best way to handle a situation like this would be to explain the medical concern to the patient and the family, and then suggest alternative ways that the family can help the patient to accomplish the task at hand.

For example, your elderly Arab patient has recently had surgery and is ordered to remain on strict bed rest, as his blood pressure is low. The family insists that the patient must get out of bed to kneel on a mat on the floor in order to pray 5 times a day. The best way to handle this situation is to explain to the family that it is safer for the patient to remain in bed at all times, as his blood pressure is low and he may injure himself if he gets out of bed too soon. Then suggest alternative ways that the family can help the patient to pray without getting out of bed.

Always allow the patient’s family to give you some insight into the situation. You may have to ask for help from the family, your charge nurse, or a translator to assist you.

Case Scenario: The Role of the Hispanic Family in Patient Care
A 36 year old Mexican man with second degree burns on his hands and arms is admitted to your unit. Although his skin grafts have healed, there is a danger that his arms and hands will stiffen and the tissue shorten. The nurse informs you that the best way to maintain maximum mobility is to ensure regular stretching and exercise of the patient's hands and arms. You explain to the patient and his
wife that is it very important for him to feed himself to maintain mobility in his hands. The wife seems to understand your explanation, yet she continues to cut her husband’s food and put it in his mouth.

When you observe this, you remove the fork out of the wife’s hand and tell the patient to feed himself because he needs to exercise his arms and hands. The wife seems skeptical but did not argue. When you return later, you see the wife once again cutting her husband’s food and putting it in his mouth.

(Scenario adapted from Transcultural Nursing, 2014c).

Case Scenario Questions

**How does the wife’s behavior make you feel?**

**Answer:**
Irritated and upset that she does not appear to be listening to your instructions.

**Why do you think she is behaving this way?**

**Answer:**
Before jumping to conclusions, always take a minute to consider the possibility of a cultural influence at play. A Cuban co-worker explains that it is part of the Hispanic culture for women to wait on Hispanic males and their culture emphasizes family interdependence over independence. For them, self-care is not an important concept, it is of greater importance that when a family member is ill, love and concern are demonstrated through care and attention.

**How can you adapt patient care to facilitate cultural differences?**

**Answer:**
You could try to find alternative exercises to promote arm and hand mobility that don’t interfere with cultural norms. For example, you can teach the wife to help her husband in other ways that will not to hinder his rehabilitation, but still demonstrate her love and concern for his well-being. For example, show her how to massage lotion on his hands, and play with a stress ball.

**Conclusion**

As CNAs, we need to learn to ask questions sensitively and to show respect for different cultural beliefs. Most important, we must listen to our patients carefully.

This course has introduced you to the work that lies ahead.

Changing attitudes is a gradual but necessary process for those of us caring for others.

Culturally diverse patients trust us to try to see things from their perspective. They rely on our efforts to understand them.

**References**


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