



## Mental Health & Wellness: Diversity & Equity 2023

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*“We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war but the positive affirmation of peace.”*

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Our culture, beliefs, sexual identity, values, race and language all affect how we perceive and experience mental health conditions. In fact, cultural differences can influence what treatments, coping mechanisms and supports work for us. It is therefore *essential* for culture and identity to be a part of the conversation as we discuss both mental health and mental health care.

Differences in our world view and perspectives can create disconnection and lead to a lack of resilience. However, our ability to come together and help each other is the main tool that we have to use in difficult times. Being aware of stereotypes, biases, and differences related to mental health disparities within diverse populations can help ensure we are expanding our lens of support toward one another and ourselves.

### **The Importance of Culture**

The shared beliefs, values and experiences of any social or racial group can result in different worldviews and have a significant impact on how someone perceives and understands mental health & wellness symptoms. For example, a person who has experienced discrimination due to their identity may experience depression symptoms as anger more than as sadness.

Language and understanding of mental illness may differ in communities as well. For instance, one study found that Caucasian Americans focused on biomedical perspectives of mental illness while Hispanic and Latino American and African American participants tended to connect mental illness to spiritual, moral and social explanations. A student must feel comfortable and understood by their fellow students, staff, and faculty for the relationship to be effective.

## Promoting A Culture of Equity and Inclusion is a Powerful Tool!

- Be an advocate when there is an opportunity to speak out on behalf of mental health & wellness for underrepresented groups and communities.
- Share information you've learned about what shapes quality care and support from a cultural and equity lens.
- Show compassion and seek to understand the experience of students with identities different from your own.
- Do not assume we all come from the same place.
- Encompass a community of dignity and respect.
- Enter conversations with humility (in an age of information, it is easy to think we already know everything).

## A Tool for Effectively Negotiating World View Differences

Navigating different world views can be very difficult and lead us to an elevated emotional state. Once again, our ability to help each other is the main tool that we get to use in difficult times. It is important to understand when we act, we often act in relationship to others. When considering which actions may be most constructive when acting amongst others, the following tools may be helpful.

### **CLARA Action Steps**

When engaging with others, often the best thing we can do is to listen, and to affirm what is being said. Too often when we are not speaking, we are also not listening with an intent to understand – we are simply waiting our turn to speak, then we jump to respond without affirming a single thing we have heard.

#### **Calm**

Internally calm yourself sufficiently to communicate accurately.

#### **Listen**

Listen with an intent to understand. Listen for underlying principles, cultural values, emotions, and issues behind what is being said. Listen for commonalities. Observe body language and tone of voice which may provide additional meaning. Listen for inherent needs and interests, not just the literal words being spoken.

#### **Affirm**

Affirm the principles or issues in what was said, or simply the feelings or emotions that were expressed (“I hear that you care strongly about this”). Affirming is not agreeing, it's acknowledging or recognizing what is shared. This can be done by simply repeating or rephrasing what was said.

## Respond

Respond to the issues that were raised and the underlying needs behind them. Ask questions about what was said.

## Add

Add information to the conversation. After seeking to understand, seek to be understood.

## Assertion Statements (also known as “I” Statements)

One way to constructively engage conflict is to communicate our desires and interests to others and share the rationales behind those interests. When we are affected by others, it can be extremely helpful to give feedback on how we were impacted.

“I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when (you) \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_. What I’m hoping we might try is \_\_\_\_\_.”

The formula above is best used by adapting it to your communication style, “voice” and culture. What’s most important is that all 4 key elements are included in your communication, regardless of the order.

- Identify and share your *feelings and emotions* about the situation.
- Identify and articulate the *cause* of those feelings.
- Provide lots of context and explanation for *why* those feelings are caused – the more the better!
- Identify and articulate what your needs and desires are – what your ideal looks like – and frame it in a way that invites others into a conversation about how that might be achieved, what their role in your vision might be, and how their own interests might be satisfied as well.

Gandhi taught us that one of the things that makes nonviolence work is that “everyone has a piece of the truth.” Training yourself to look for and find that truth can help to make space for different perspectives and connect with others regardless of their world view. This may change your life in unexpected ways. All of us have hot buttons in the back of our minds, but most of us are looking for meaningful connections and ways to resolve conflict effectively. For some, these techniques may be new and difficult to incorporate into everyday life, but they will undoubtedly benefit all of us in the end.

*“When we embrace diversity, or the ways in which we are unique, we unleash the potential to tap into a source of collective beauty, wisdom and cultural wealth.”*



## References

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