

FAQ: How can substance abuse prevention and treatment programs address the cultural needs of immigrant families?

Social and cultural variables greatly influence the initiation and maintenance of substance use and addiction. It is also well established that culture impacts how people experience various aspects of substance abuse prevention and treatment interventions.¹⁻³ Among immigrant populations, feelings of discrimination, cultural mistrust, ethnic pride, as well as level of acculturation can significantly influence the effectiveness of substance abuse programs.⁴⁻⁶

To effectively respond to the unique needs of immigrants, substance abuse interventions should be provided in a culturally competent manner.⁵⁻⁷ Interventions must be sensitive to cultural values of immigrant populations, while at the same time, addressing the common etiological factors of substance abuse. Cultural competence involves the understanding and appreciation of the important role that cultural differences play on patients' health beliefs and behaviors.⁷ It includes the policies, practices and attitudes, among organizations and individuals, that enables them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations and environments.⁸ Culturally competent services not only respect but also value differences among populations; and assumes responsibility to address these differences to assure the delivery of quality care.⁹ Cultural competence is a dynamic and evolutionary process that should occur at both individual and organizational levels.⁹ There is no quick and easy process for creating culturally competent services. Nevertheless, in order to effectively serve immigrant and minority populations, substance abuse interventions can integrate the following examples:

Ensure Cultural Representation

- Work with a diverse collaborative team in which staff and team members at all levels represent the cultural values of the target population, and have been involved in its culture and traditions. The community must be represented in all phases of the program design, and must be encouraged to take a lead role.^{10, 11}
- Train staff and volunteers so that they become aware of specific cultural patterns of the community and also become aware of their own racial and cultural backgrounds. Staff and volunteers working at all levels should recognize how stereotypes and biases undermine their efforts. ^{8, 9}
- Develop partnerships with support networks such as native healers, religious and community leaders; and include family members and other support figures, such as friends in programmatic efforts ^{6, 12}
- Recruit members of the community to participate in program planning, development, and service delivery. Minority youth respond more favorably to programs in which teachers or characters are members of their own group.¹³

Develop a “Way-of-Knowing”

- Use focus groups to gather information to create culturally sensitive intervention messages.⁶
- Value diversity and respect differences in your target community. Recognize diversity not only between cultures but also within cultures. Instead of only relying on stereotypes, address the specific ways in which the target population understands substance abuse.^{8,9}
- Develop an understanding about the ethnic and cultural differences in the risk and protective factors associated with substance use. Develop an understanding about the trends and consumption patterns of the target population, taking into consideration levels of acculturation and biculturalism when interpreting substance use data.⁵

Offer Acceptable & Accessible Services

- Incorporating images of people, places, food, and other cultural elements into informational materials enhances surface sensitivity.⁵
- Programs that reflect the recognition of an immigrant group’s cultural values increases the group’s receptivity to its underlying prevention and intervention messages. Program messages and strategies should reflect cultural themes. For example, among Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees, kinship solidarity and the search for equilibrium emerged as dominant cultural themes that could be effective carriers of health messages.¹⁴
- Another way to culturally tailor a program is to acknowledge differences in cultural attitudes relating to alcohol and drugs. There are consistent correlations between one’s cultural identification and his/her beliefs about health issues, responses to messages, and substance use behaviors.¹⁵
- Including the best of both worlds- i.e. the immigrant group culture and the American and cultures - in all the phases of substance abuse interventions enhances their effectiveness and quality.¹¹
- Offer training that promotes bicultural competence as a way to help individuals develop coping skills that blend the values of the new and their own culture.⁶
- Provide instruction and information in a language that recipients understand. Translations of text-based information, native speakers, and interpreter services are necessary to make a prevention program accessible to service recipients who are not fluent in English.⁵
- Recognize that language interpretation is a complex process and requires more than the simple translation of materials. Adapt all messages in ways that are cultural relevant to the target population. Services should be provided by a team that is bilingual and also bicultural. Hire staff that understands not only the language but the culture behind it.^{11,12}
- Ensure full access by providing flexible hours, convenient locations, helping with transportation, reducing waiting times, and creating efficient referral mechanisms.^{7,12}

In summary the development and integration of a culturally competent plan in substance abuse interventions is a key strategy to effectively address the prevention and treatment needs of immigrants and minorities. It is important to understand that being culturally competent does not imply learning everything that there is to learn about a culture. Instead, it means being able to recognize the importance that culture plays in health behaviors and beliefs, to appreciate differences, and to be willing to accept that there is more than one way to see the world.



Useful Links

National Center for Cultural Competence

<http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/>

The Office of Minority Health

<http://www.omhrc.gov/templates/browse.aspx?lvl=2&lvlID=15/>

The Diversity Rx WebSite

<http://www.diversityrx.org/>

Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health

<http://www.raceandhealth.hhs.gov>

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