University of the People

PSYC Introduction to Health Phychology

Unit 7 Written Assignment 7

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# Cultural Influences on Health and Strategies for Culturally Competent Care

Culture profoundly shapes individuals’ perspectives on health, illness, and healthcare. For healthcare professionals working in diverse communities, understanding the cultural belief systems of patients is essential to improving outcomes and fostering trust. This report explores how cultural beliefs influence health behaviors and treatment decisions, particularly in the multicultural context of Singapore, and provides practical strategies to ensure culturally competent care.

## The Role of Culture in Health Beliefs and Behaviors

Culture is not static; it encompasses shared customs, languages, values, and worldviews that evolve over time (Caring for Kids New to Canada, 2025). These cultural frameworks affect not only how people perceive symptoms and illnesses but also their decision-making regarding when and how to seek help. For example, while Western biomedical models attribute illness to pathogens or physiological dysfunction, many non-Western cultures may view disease as stemming from spiritual imbalance, divine will, or social disharmony (EuroMed Info, 2025). Such beliefs affect patients’ willingness to accept diagnoses or engage in certain treatments.

Furthermore, collectivist cultures often emphasize family and community in decision-making processes. In Singapore, Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities frequently involve elders or extended relatives in health-related decisions, contrasting with individualistic norms of Western medicine. As a result, patients may appear indecisive when, in fact, they are awaiting group consensus (Caring for Kids New to Canada, 2025).

## Observed Cultural Beliefs in the Community

In Singapore’s multicultural society, distinct cultural groups exhibit unique health beliefs. Chinese patients may rely on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), incorporating herbal remedies or acupuncture based on the yin-yang theory. Among Malays, spiritual beliefs about illness, such as ‘angin’ (wind) or spiritual affliction, may be considered causes of disease. Indian patients often integrate Ayurveda or religious rituals as part of their healing process.

Cultural stigma also plays a role. In many Asian communities, mental illness is often associated with shame, which may discourage individuals from seeking psychological help (EuroMed Info, 2025). For example, depression may not be discussed openly due to fears it might ‘dishonor’ the family. Such taboos hinder timely diagnosis and care.

## Strategies for Delivering Culturally Competent Care

Culturally competent care involves recognizing, respecting, and responding appropriately to patients’ cultural health beliefs. Healthcare providers must first develop cultural self-awareness—acknowledging their own biases and how these may affect patient interactions (Caring for Kids New to Canada, 2025).

Effective communication is central. Using qualified interpreters, avoiding assumptions, and asking open-ended questions—such as ‘Are there any traditional practices you follow when you are ill?’—can promote meaningful dialogue. Additionally, acknowledging patients’ reliance on complementary therapies, while guiding them on safe integration with biomedical treatments, builds trust.

Healthcare systems should adapt to the diversity of patient populations by offering staff training in cultural humility and cross-cultural communication. Educational materials should be translated and culturally relevant. Providers should also assess the role of family in care decisions and engage with key family members when appropriate.

Lastly, recognizing broader structural inequalities—such as poverty, housing, and migration trauma—enables providers to address not just individual-level behaviors but systemic barriers to care (Caring for Kids New to Canada, 2025).

## Conclusion

Understanding the intricate relationship between culture and health enhances the quality and equity of care provided in diverse communities. By acknowledging cultural beliefs and delivering culturally responsive care, healthcare providers can improve health outcomes, reduce disparities, and foster inclusive healthcare environments. Cultural competence is not a fixed skill but an ongoing commitment to respectful, patient-centered care.

# References

Caring for Kids New to Canada. (2025). How culture influences health. Canadian Paediatric Society. https://kidsnewtocanada.ca/culture/How-Culture-Influences-Health

EuroMed Info. (2025). How culture influences health beliefs. https://www.euromedinfo.eu/how-culture-influences-health-beliefs.html