Chapter Six

Culture and Health

The Importance of Culture to Health

- Culture is related to health behaviors
- Culture is an important determinant of people's perceptions of illness
- Culture affects usage of health services
- Different cultures have different health practices

The Concept of Culture

- Culture - "behavior and beliefs that are learned and shared"
- Influences family, social groups, individual growth, communication, religion, art, politics, the economy
- Society - "a group of people that occupy a specific locality and share the same cultural traditions"
- Health policies and programs must always keep culture in mind

Health Beliefs and Practices

- Cultures vary in views of what is illness, what causes illness, and what should be done about it

- Different ideas about how to prevent problems, what health care they should seek, and the types of remedies that health providers should offer

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Health Beliefs and Practices

Perceptions of Illness

- Vary across groups

- One culture may view certain signs or symptoms as an affliction while others consider them normal

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Health Beliefs and Practices

Perceptions of Disease

- Disease - "malfunctioning or maladaptation of biologic and psychophysiologic processes in the individual"

- Illness - "personal, interpersonal, and cultural reactions to disease or discomfort"

- Some cultures believe illness can be caused by emotional stress, supernatural causes, or bodily imbalance

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Health Beliefs and Practices

Folk Illness

- Cultural interpretations of physical states that people perceive to be illness, but that do not have a physiologic cause

- Efforts to improve health need to consider these beliefs

Table 6.1: Selected Examples of Cultural Explanations of Disease

TABLE 6-1 Selected Examples of Cultural Explanations of Disease

Body Balances	Emotional	Supernatural	Sexual
Temperature	Fright	Bewitching	Sex with forbidden person
Energy	Sorrow	Demons	Overindulgence in sex
Blood	Envy	Spirit possession	
Dislocation	Stress	Evil eye	
Problems with organs		Offending god or gods	
Incompatibility of horoscopes		Soul loss	

Source: Adapted from Scrimshaw SC. Culture, behavior, and health. In: Merson MH, Black RE, Mills A, eds. *International Public Health: Diseases, Programs, Systems, and Policies.* Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett; 2006:53-78.

Health Beliefs and Practices

The Prevention of Illness

- Many cultures have taboos that concern avoiding illness

- Many concern foods to avoid during pregnancy

- Wide variety of ritual practices to avoid illness

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Health Beliefs and Practices

The Diagnosis and Treatment of Illness and the Use of Health Services

- Common to try a home remedy, then visit a local healer, then consult a "western doctor"

- "Patterns of resort" affected by cost of services, manner in which the provider treats them socially

Health Beliefs and Practices

Health Providers

- Depend on location

- Local practitioners of indigenous medicine - traditional birth attendants, herbalists, priests

- Practitioners of western medicine - community health workers, nurses, physicians

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Table 6.2: Select Examples of Health Services Providers

TABLE 6-2 Selected Examples of Health Service Providers

Indigenous	Western Biomedical	Other Medical Systems
Midwives	Pharmacists	Chinese medical system
Shamans	Nurse-midwives	• Practitioners
Curers	Nurses	• Chemists/herbalists
Spirtualists	Nurse-practitioners	• Acupuncturists
Witches	Physicians	Ayuervedic practitioners
Sorcerers	Dentists	
Priests		
Diviners		
Herbalists		
Bonesetters		

Source: Adapted from Scrimshaw SC. Culture, behavior, and health. In: Merson MH, Black RE, Mills A, eds. *International Public Health: Diseases, Programs, Systems, and Policies.* Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett; 2006:53-78.

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Health Behaviors and Behavior Change

- Leading causes of death in low- and middle-income countries include ischemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, HIV, pneumonia, malaria, TB, diarrhea

- Risk factors include nutrition, tobacco use, unsafe sex, unsafe water and sanitation

- How can unhealthy behaviors be changed?

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Health Behaviors and Behavior Change

Improving Health Behaviors

- The Ecological Perspective

- "Health related behaviors are affected by, and affect, multiple levels of influence"

- "Behavior both influences and is influenced by the social environments in which it occurs"

Health Behaviors and Behavior Change

Improving Health Behaviors

- The Health Belief Model

- People's health behaviors depend on their perceptions of: their likelihood of getting the illness, the severity of the illness, the benefits of engaging in behaviors that prevent the illness, barriers to engaging in preventive behaviors

- Self-efficacy- whether or not people feel that they could carry out the behavior

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Health Behaviors and Behavior Change

Improving Health Behaviors

- Stages of Change Model

- Change is a process and different people are at different stages of the process

Table 6-4: Stages of Change

TABLE 6-4 The Stages of Change Model

Stages

Precontemplation

Contemplation

Decision/Determination

Action

Maintenance

Source: Data with permission from Murphy E. *Promoting Healthy Behavior, Health Bulletin 2.* Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau; 2005.

Health Behaviors and Behavior Change

Improving Health Behaviors

- The Diffusion of Innovations Model

- Communication promotes social change

- Diffusion is the process by which innovations are communicated over time among members of different groups

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Understanding and Engendering Behavior Change

Understanding Behaviors

Requires assessment of:

- Behaviors that are taking place

- Extent to which they are helpful or harmful

- Underlying motivation for these behaviors

- Likely responses to different approaches to changing the unhealthy behaviors

Understanding and Engendering Behavior Change

Changing Health Behaviors

- Community Mobilization

- Engage entire community in efforts to identify problems and promote healthy behaviors

- Leaders in community need to be mobilized, willing to champion change

Understanding and Engendering Behavior Change

Changing Health Behaviors

- Mass media

- Often uses radio or educational performances to get a message across

Understanding and Engendering Behavior Change

Changing Health Behaviors

- Social Marketing

- Application of tools of commercial marketing to promote a behavior change

- Depends on careful market research and understanding of local culture and values

Understanding and Engendering Behavior Change

Changing Health Behaviors

- Health Education

- Comes in many forms such as classroom or mass media

- Successful programs are clear, provide accurate information, gear content to target group

Understanding and Engendering Behavior Change

Changing Health Behaviors

- Conditional Cash Transfers

- A government agency provides an economic incentive for families who engage in a certain healthy behavior

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Table 6.6: Selected Factors for Success in Health Promotion

Identify specific health problems, related behaviors, and key stakeholders.

Know and use sound behavioral theories.

Research motivations and constraints to change, considering biologic, environmental, cultural, and other contextual factors.

Use participatory assessment tools and include relevant stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the intervention.

Plan and budget carefully.

Identify people who exhibit healthy behaviors that differ from the social norm.

Create an environment that enables behavior change through policy dialogue, advocacy, and capacity building.

Organize an intervention that addresses both specific behaviors and contextual factors.

Work to ensure sustainability.

Evaluate from the beginning.

Form partnerships to scale up and/or adapt the most successful interventions for implementation in other settings.

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Social Assessment

- Social assessment - "a process for assessing the social impacts of planned interventions or events or and for developing strategies for the ongoing monitoring and management of those impacts"
- Important to include the affected communities

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