What is Cultural Competence?

After completing this lesson you will be able to:

- Explain why working towards cultural competence is a critical part of support work.
- Define the following terms: Affiliation; Culture; Cultural Competence; Diversity; Ethnicity; and Race.
- Describe the difference between race, ethnicity, and culture.
- Describe five essential elements and the importance of cultural competence.
- Describe the cultural competence continuum and state how it may be useful.
A reflection on trends in services:

How and where support services are delivered has changed dramatically in the last several decades. There are two trends in human and community services that will be most affected by cultural diversity. One is the trend towards individualized and in-home services. The other is the trend toward evaluating services in terms of achievement of person-centered outcomes.

Take a minute to reflect on these trends. Write down your answers to the questions below.

1) All people want supports that reflect their culture. Do you think that the ability of the direct support professional to work with people with different cultural backgrounds might get more attention in family or consumer-owned homes and employment situations than in agency-run homes or employment situations? Why or why not?

2) How do you think person-centered services can be affected by cultural differences? Does everybody, regardless of culture, have the same idea about what will lead them to a higher quality of life? Why or why not?
Reflections on the Benefits and Fears of Learning More about Culture:

Being culturally competent is critical to your role as a Direct Support Professional. You may find there are benefits beyond your work today. Many people find that learning about new cultures is fun and exciting because you are always learning something new. You may begin to understand yourself better. You might learn how to improve your relationships with coworkers, community members, and families.

Despite the positive benefits of becoming more culturally competent, you may have some concerns as well. Someone may have told you that you have to tolerate what you see as insensitive behavior on the part of another as a part of accepting diversity. Or, you may have noticed someone approach a situation in an entirely different way than you would.

Write your responses to the questions below:

1. Think about past or current learning experiences that involve culture, beliefs, customs, and values. What benefits can you and others gain from this type of learning? Write two or three personal benefits from this type of learning.

2. What concerns might people have about the content of this course? Write down two or three concerns that you have about the content of this course.
Culture includes beliefs, traditions, experiences, behaviors, rituals, and values that are shared within a group. What distinguishes culture from personal beliefs is that culture is shared by others who have the same values and customs. In addition, cultures develop over long periods of time, from generation to generation and from group to group.

Culture is the lens through which a person views the world. It is what helps a person decide what is right or wrong. It is how people understand what is happening and how to react or interact in various situations. Culture is part of a person’s identity. It is part of a person’s connection with others.

A person’s unique culture is developed through a combination of many life experiences. It is shaped by others who participate in the same rituals and traditions and through shared beliefs and living in similar circumstances with others. These can include the person’s race and ethnicity. It can include the language he or she speaks or where the person lives. It can include how much money the person has, along with many other things such as sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, disability, and other life experiences.

Review the definitions you just read about culture. Compare it to your own definitions. How are the definitions similar to one another? How are they different?
Reflections on Race

A race is a group of people who have shared physical and genetic traits. These similarities can include skin color, eye color and shape, hair texture, blood type, or other hereditary qualities.

Review the definition of race on this page. How are these definitions similar to one another? How are they different? How will you use what you have learned in your job? Write your answers below.

Write your responses to the questions below

1. What is your race?

2. Have you ever been confused about which race you belong to? Or has someone ever assumed you were a different race? Describe these situations and how you felt.
3. Are you ever curious or nervous when you talk to someone without knowing their race? (For example, on the phone) Why or why not?

4. Have you ever been surprised by someone’s race after you got to know them? Describe the situation? What assumptions had you made about the person?

5. Do you have friends and family members of a different race? If so, which races and what valuable information have you learned from your interactions?

6. Are you comfortable with members of your family (or yourself) dating and marrying people of a different race? Why or why not?
Reflections on Your Ethnicity:

Ethnicity is the shared history, language, traditions and practices of a group of people. Often, but not always, these people are of the same race.

Some things to know about ethnicity and culture:

- Ethnicity has a strong effect on a person’s culture.
- Religious practices and language are often a core part of a person’s ethnicity.
- Ethnicity and race are not the same thing. For example, people of Chinese and Vietnamese descent may both be identified as Asian (race). However, they can and do have different customs, manner of dress, religious practice, and communication styles (ethnicity).
- Some groups maintain separate customs, beliefs, and practices from others. They do this even when they share communities for many generations with people of different ethnic backgrounds.
- Some groups actively adopt practices of other cultures and ethnic groups.

Review the definition of ethnicity and compare it to yours. How are these two definitions similar? How are they different?

Take a minute to reflect on your ethnic background. Answer each of the questions listed below.

1. What are your ethnic roots?

2. Do you feel a strong connection to your ethnic roots? Why or why not?

3. List at least 3 customs you practice or beliefs you have that come from your ethnic background. (For example, foods, dress, family roles, religious practices, celebrations, methods of greeting others).
Reflections on Your Affiliation:

Affiliation is how much a person relates to his or her life circumstances.

Some things to know about affiliation and culture:

- Some people strongly relate to their circumstances. Some people do not.
- Affiliation is a choice.
- Some cultures do not encourage personal decisions about affiliation or about affiliation at all. Other cultures encourage choice and personal decision about affiliation.
- People may choose NOT to affiliate with life circumstances (such as race, ethnicity, religious training, economic status, disability). But they are STILL influenced by those life circumstances.

Review the definition of affiliation. Compare it to yours. How are these two definitions similar? How are they different?

Listen to the two voice clips in Lesson 1 on page 17. These two parents have a different level of affiliation to being the parent of a child with disabilities. After listening to both clips, take a minute to answer these questions.

1. How do you think their responses will shape their experience? What will be different? What will be the same?

2. Do you think one view is better than the other? Why or why not?
Five Elements to Becoming More Culturally Competent:

1. Valuing Diversity:
   To become more culturally competent, you must believe that having different views is okay. You do not have to agree with every person's views, but you must listen and be attentive. You need to do more than tolerate differences. Valuing diversity means understanding that in many cases it is not "right" or "wrong" but simply different. It means believing that you can learn from others. It means having respect for other views. You will come to know and believe that diversity brings strength to life situations.

2. Being Able to Assess Cultural Views:
   Many people do not know how to think about their own culture. Much of our culture is learned when we are small children and reinforced everyday by our living it. Much of our culture develops without thinking much about it. It is important to be able to recognize our own cultural views. Understanding our own culture is the starting point for understanding why, what, and how others think and believe. It is also the starting point for identifying the culture of our own or others' organizations or systems.

3. Being Aware of How Culture Affects Situations:
   Many people do not think about culture as part of a problem. Instead they may get frustrated. They may assume others are trying to be difficult. They may assume people are incompetent. They may begin to develop prejudice towards others. Being able to recognize when problems may have cultural roots, can stop these types of misunderstandings. It can lead to better and longer-lasting solutions.

4. Learning and Sharing about Culture:
   To be culturally competent, you must develop ways to learn about culture. This means being able to find trustworthy sources of information. It means learning from and respecting the persons you support. In an organization, it means finding ways to keep information from being forgotten or lost. It means ensuring that every employee can find and apply this knowledge.

5. Being Able to Change the Way You Behave:
   Knowing about culture is not enough. You must be able to change the way you behave if that's what is needed. An example of this is changing the way you greet someone. Another example is sharing concern in a different way. Changing your behavior is one way of conveying respect. It can help others feel more comfortable. You must also recognize when it would not be helpful to change your behavior. In some cases adopting another person's culture might be seen as being disrespectful.

Take a few minutes to write your responses to the following questions.

1. Why do you think valuing diversity is important? Could a person or organization become culturally competent without valuing diversity? Why or why not?

2. Which of the abilities above will be hardest to learn or do? Why?
The Cultural Competence Continuum:

1. **Cultural Destructiveness.** Beliefs and actions that are harmful toward other cultures. People and institutions that fall on this part of the continuum often do not recognize culture. They may believe that people from other cultures are abnormal or dangerous. They may deny the civil or human rights of people from other cultures.

2. **Cultural Incapacity.** Beliefs and actions that act as “benign neglect” toward other cultures. People and institutions that fall on this part of the continuum often do not recognize culture. Or they may believe that their culture is better than others. However, they do not intentionally harm others.

3. **Cultural Inattention.** Beliefs and actions that deny differences in cultural values. People and institutions that fall along this point on the continuum do not recognize the hidden parts of culture. They believe, deep down, all people are the same. They do not look for the unique or different qualities in each person. They do not recognize that people may want to be treated differently, yet they do not intentionally harm others or prefer one group over another.

4. **Cultural Pre-Competence.** Beliefs and actions that recognize differences in cultural views. People and institutions that fall on this part of the continuum are beginning to recognize when situations are influenced by culture. They may value diversity. However, they do not know how to handle cultural conflicts. Or, they may not know where to find reliable resources to help them deal with conflicts. In addition, they support basic protections of and foster growth among different groups.

5. **Basic Cultural Competence.** Beliefs and actions that value diversity. People and institutions that fall on this part of the continuum welcome the chance to learn from people from different cultures. They often recognize when problems stem from cultural differences. They have a basic ability to work with people of varying cultures. They have skills and resources for dealing with some situations. They may find other situations more difficult.

6. **Advanced Cultural Competence.** Beliefs and actions that put a high value on diversity. People and institutions that fall on this part of the continuum are able to quickly identify situations that are influenced by culture. They have many resources for understanding culture. They have good ability to build on current knowledge and share it. Many times individuals at this level take on leadership and human resource development roles as a consultant or within an organization.

Being aware of the six stages of the cultural continuum is helpful. If you can identify where examples of behavior or policy fall on the continuum, you will be better at identifying what needs to happen to make services and situations more culturally competent.

In another lesson, you will learn more about the cultural competence continuum and the six stages. You will be asked to compare your responses to these and other questions. For now, take a minute to respond to the following questions.
1. Think about the different definitions of cultural competence that you have learned over the past few pages. Compare your definition of cultural competence with the ones you just read. How are the definitions similar? How are they different? How will you use what you have learned about the definition?

2. Where do you think you fall on the cultural continuum today? Why?

3. What strengths do you bring to situations where culture is important? (Think about the five elements of cultural competence.)

4. What areas are not strengths for you in situations where culture is important?

5. In what areas do you think you could or want to learn more?