

Don't Ignore Culture in Dealing with Trauma

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No two people react to things in quite the same way. They celebrate differently. They suffer differently. And when they suffer, they find different ways to heal. Some seek out company; others turn inward. Many look to religion, but not all. Some welcome help from a therapist, while others see nothing wrong that they can't fix themselves. The contrasts are countless, and many of them are rooted in culture.

Culture includes all the customs and beliefs that define a group. The foods you eat, the clothes you wear and the holidays you celebrate all reflect culture. Nations have distinctive cultures. So do ethnic groups, religions, families and immigrant communities. So one person is really part of several cultures, and influenced by all of them.

Culture also shapes the way people react to disasters, violence or other traumatic events. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it hinders. But it's always there.

If you are recovering from a trauma, you might draw on cultural influences for inner strength and coping strategies. But you also need to look at culture objectively. Some traditional ways of dealing with stress or tragedy may not work for you. And if you are caring for someone who has experienced trauma, you need to keep 2 cultures in mind. That is yours and theirs.

Here is some advice on how to make culture a positive force when dealing with trauma:

Look to the past for examples. Think about what your parents or grandparents would have done if they were in your shoes. If you know of times when earlier generations suffered hardship and got through it, find out what they did. If people from that generation are still alive, talk to them if you can. You may be inspired and encouraged. You may also get practical advice.

Choose the traditions that work for you. Just as it is good to learn from the past, it is important to remember that times have changed. You are also unique. Behavior that works for others, even people with whom you have plenty in common, may not help you. It may even hurt. Let's say you grew up in a culture that stressed self-reliance; maybe you grew up hearing how your ancestors tamed the frontier or crossed the seas without much help from anyone. These stories can inspire you to endure hardships. But they also may keep you from admitting weakness and getting the help you need. So draw from your culture, but don't be ruled by it.

Avoid stereotyping. An individual's cultural makeup may not be what you think. It's easy to fall into the trap of assuming people from cultures will act a certain way. This is especially true with someone you don't know well.

A stereotype is a widely held idea of how members of a group tend to think or behave. They can have some basis in fact. They can also be positive, though, of course, they're not always.

Even positive stereotypes can cause trouble. For example, it may be true that Italian-American culture places a high value on close family ties. A close-knit family can be a godsend after a trauma. But what if you're helping an Italian-American who doesn't fit that mold? He may not talk with his family. Or he may have no relatives that live nearby or are still alive. You can't assume that his family is a cultural source of strength for him.

Assuming cultural traits about people without getting to know them is stereotyping. What people really need is for you to know them as their own person.

Resources

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has several articles on trauma and culture at <http://www.nctsnet.org/resources/topics/culture-and-trauma/resources>. This material is written for therapists but can be useful for caregivers, especially those caring for children.

The National Association of School Psychologists has advice for dealing with cultural issues in a crisis situation. Go to http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/neat_cultural.aspx. This article is adapted from the *National Organization for Victim Assistance Community Response Team Training Manual*.

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