

Understanding Arab Culture and Customs Related to Recovery

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Objective of the Session

- To foster awareness and understanding of Arab/ Arab American culture as it relates to behavioral health and as it relates to access and effectiveness of treatment approaches.
- To provide service practitioners with best practices that may inform their work with Arab American clients.

Definition of Arab Americans

- Members of an immigrant group in the U.S. who can trace ethnic origins to one or more of the following Arabic speaking countries:
 - Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen.

Statistics on Arab Americans

- US Census produced first report on Arab ancestry in 2000
 - About 1.2 million people in the US reported an Arab ancestry.
 - People from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt accounted for about three-fifths of the Arab population
 - About half of the Arab population was concentrated in only five states—California, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York
 - Proportion of the population that was Arab was highest in Michigan (1.2% of total population).

Historical Waves of Arab Immigrants to the US

– The First Wave: 1875 – 1925

- Village farmers or artisans
- Mainly young Christian men from Mt. Lebanon
- Immigrated for economic opportunities
- Did not identify as “Arab” but rather as members of a kinship group, religious group, or village

Historical Waves of Arab Immigrants to the US

– The Second Wave: 1945 – Present

- Christians and Muslims from broader range of countries
- Large numbers of relatively well-off, highly educated professionals (lawyers, professors, teachers, engineers, and doctors)
- Attracted to US for economic opportunities
- Driven from homelands due to social and political changes

Aspects of Arab Culture

■ 'ayb

- Arabic term referring to “shame.”
- The use of the term and concept is prominent in Arab culture, highlighting the importance of reputation and honor.

(Wikan, 1984)

Aspects of Arab Culture

■ Kalam Innas

- Arabic phrase referring to “the people’s talk.”
- Significant part of Arab socialization which guides behavior whereby group members, before taking action, are encouraged to consider what other people in the community might say about their actions.

Aspects of Arab Culture

Basic Beliefs

- Islam as a way of life (Submission to Allah)—social, economic, spiritual, and political
- Dependence on God
 - Feeling of dependency on God
 - Fear of God's punishment on earth
 - Respect for tradition and for the past
 - Politeness for all and generosity

Perception of Mental Illness

- Punishment from God for the sins of the individual or his/her family; touched by jinn, or ridden by the devil.
- Mental illness is shunned
- Reluctance to send a disturbed family member to an asylum or treatment out of desire not to recognize or disclose the problem.
- Substance use disorders seen as controllable

Non-Recognition of Chronic Disease

- Stigma or 'ayb oriented. Chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes are considered hereditary and reflect on the whole family.
- Fear of reducing marriageability of children by disclosure of these kinds of illnesses.
- Implications for substance use disorders as disease.

Belief in Unseen Forces

- There is an acceptance among many Arabs of unseen forces that may cause disease (jinn, evil eye)
- Jinn are feared as malevolent and capricious spirits that may cause illness and other evil.
- Evil eye can be understood in the context of fearing the envy of others which may also be the cause of sickness or even death.

Deep Seated Respect for Age and Expertise

- Respect increases with age and authority
- Arab patients tend to submit to authority without questioning
- Perception that doctor is incompetent will not result in an open confrontation/discussion with the doctor. Instead will result in noncompliance with directions.

Concept of Time

- Time is not linear and not constricted.
- Lateness is accepted and anger about it is not understood.
- Insha' Allah—not “tomorrow at 9:30am” but “insha allah I'll see you before lunch.”

Special Acknowledgement

Arab Community Center for Economic
and Social Services (ACCESS), *Guide
to Arab Culture: Health Care Delivery
to the Arab American Community*
(1999)