

# Stay aware of cultural differences.

As nutrition educators, we bring a full lifetime of experience to our jobs! Who are we?

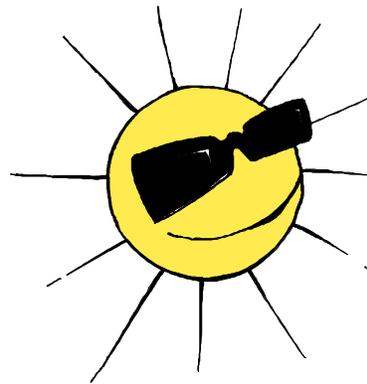
Without thinking about it, we also bring our culture along in the attitudes and rules we have learned from our parents, relatives, schools, and community. We bring the books we've read, the social experiences we've had, and the TV shows we've watched. We bring our level of exposure to people different than our-selves, our education, our degrees, and our images of our selves. We bring along all of our experience in our family and in our work.

In the WIC Program, the population we serve is culturally diverse. When

we can provide information that is consistent and appropriate with the culture of the WIC client, we have a much greater chance of enhancing the nutrition and health of their families.

Culture or a cultural group can be defined as people who share a set of beliefs, customs, values, and language. Each group has a set of values or a widely held belief about what is worthwhile, desirable, or important for well-being. These values provide the basis for a person's beliefs and behaviors around nutrition.

In order to assist a variety of people, it is helpful to view our own cultural values, beliefs, and heritage. Let's analyze ourselves for a few minutes.



*Culture or a cultural group can be defined as people who share a set of beliefs,*

*"Many, if not most,  
of the world's  
cultures view  
revelations of intimate  
personal and family  
details to a stranger  
as highly  
unacceptable."*

*Paul B. Pedersen, et al  
Counseling Across Cultures,  
4th Ed*

Let's try to see what assumptions and expectations we bring to nutrition education in WIC--things that we may never think about--and let's see if becoming aware of them may contribute to our success.

- **We expect people to tell us private things.** Because it's our job and we're used to it, we don't think talking about what a client eats or how they feed their child is an especially sensitive subject. But it *is* personal, almost as personal as bowel habits, which we also sometimes talk about! Telling us about how they feed their families opens a client up to potential criticism. We assess what they tell us and we often suggest changes. Is it any wonder when a client might not want to tell us much? Would you want to provide this information about yourself to your client? Or how do we feel when a client tells us too much? Think about it!

- **We expect people to be willing to listen to our ideas about how to feed themselves and their children.** We know that nutrition education is part of the

package when people sign up for WIC. We assume it's part of what they are willing to do to get the WIC foods. But people are often unprepared to have to listen to what we think about how they feed their children. Therefore, we need to be sensitive, especially on the first visit. Your client may not have known that your assessment and counseling was part of the deal. If the client returns they are now probably prepared for this aspect of a WIC appointment. If the client does not return you may know why. It is important to explain that nutrition information will be part of each WIC appointment.

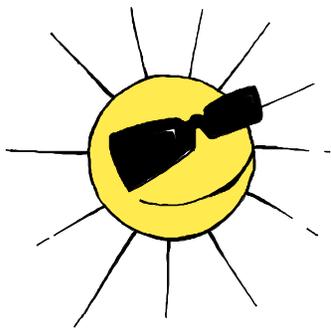
- **We expect people to be comfortable with numbers of servings and serving sizes.** We like numbers of servings and serving sizes because they keep things measurable and this helps us evaluate diets . . . but that doesn't make number of servings and serving sizes the most effective information to share with a client! It may be very appropriate for you to discuss numbers of servings and serving sizes with *some* of your clients. However, most people aren't

interested. They don't count servings or estimate serving sizes and they're not about to start. With most people you will get a better response if you talk about *the food habits themselves* that contribute to meeting their nutritional needs. They will usually listen closely when you talk about *their* concerns, *their* problems, *their* child, *their* weight gain patterns, *their* meals, *their* life.

- **We expect that if we say there is a problem, the client will agree.** How many times have you talked with someone who does not agree with you that a nutrition problem exists? It happens often, doesn't it? Once we pick up on a client's hesitation to acknowledge a problem, we usually try to get them to see things from our point of view. But do we give them enough time to think? Do we give them a chance to air their opinion? If we go full steam ahead

talking about a problem that the client does *not* think is a problem, we will find ourselves going nowhere fast. Give people time to think about what you are talking about and reasons to consider the benefits of doing something differently. Don't force it on them. This gives them a chance to accept there might be something to work on--without losing face. Also, do we insist on calling something a "problem" even if it's just a concern?

- **We expect people to be comfortable with action steps, goal setting, and looking to the future.** We ourselves may be comfortable with the idea of exercising now in order to have a healthy heart in 30 or 40 years. Some of us may make "to-do" lists and organize around goals and deadlines. But are our clients action and goal oriented? Is that their cultural




---

Food is very personal. Who likes to be told that what they eat isn't good for them? So when you ask about food, clients may tell you only what they think you want to hear.

**"The imposition of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to counseling is no longer acceptable to clients from their diversity of cultural contexts."**

*Paul B. Pedersen, et al  
Counseling Across Cultures,  
4th Ed.*

way? Or are they more present-oriented, trusting that the future will take care of itself? Do they, in fact, feel that the future is out of their hands and whatever will be, will be? These are cultural differences, rooted in different perceptions of self and reality, rooted in history, religion, and tradition. These are not the lazy habits of un-motivated people. Culture defines who we are to a great extent. You may work with people from many cultures. The more sophisticated you are, the more you will try to accept cultural differences and work with them. Think about these differences.

- **We sometimes expect a client to do something--even if her mother or grandmother has a different opinion about it.** You may be talking about when to give solid foods, how to wean a baby from the bottle, what foods to eat when a pregnant woman has nausea or any number of other situations. How careful are you to ask if the client's family will agree to the advice? Our personal orientation might be that each person is an individual who decides on their own to do

something. However, especially with people in cultures different than mainstream American culture, we should consider and talk about the traditions and beliefs in the family that might make changing difficult. You will be more effective in working with people if you check regularly to see if what you are suggesting is going to be met with agreement or resistance at home. Think about asking the client how difficult it will be to make changes. Consider whether the practice is harmful or not. If it is not harmful it may be best to back off and counsel differently.

There is a lot to think about in nutrition education, isn't there? It's not a cut-and-dried process. Nutrition education is not just handing a pamphlet to someone or turning on a video. It's a dynamic process that you bring your whole self to. It's always a challenge, and especially so when you work with people who are culturally different than you are. Becoming aware of the assumptions and expectations you take for granted can help make you a more effective nutrition educator.

# ACTIVITIES to do before Discussion

## Stay aware of cultural differences

We are different than our clients in many ways. We try to overcome the differences, of course. We look for things we have in common. We try to work with universal motivations, desires, beliefs. We relate as one individual to another. We do our best to communicate well, overcome differences, and educate, but differences do exist.

1. ***Complete the next two exercises to assess your own cultural heritage and to determine how you might relate to different members of society.*** These answers are only for your personal use in clarifying your initial reactions to different people and your ability to work with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. This exercise is intended only to help you understand your cultural heritage. You might want to complete these at home in private.

- A. **What ethnic group, socioeconomic class, religion, age group, and community do you belong to?**
- B. **What experiences have you had with people from ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, religions, age groups, or communities different from your own?**
- C. **What were those experiences like? How did you feel about them?**
- D. **When you were growing up, what did your parents and significant others say about people who were different from your family?**
- E. **What about your ethnic group, socioeconomic class, religion, age, or community do you find embarrassing or wish you could change? Why?**
- F. **What sociocultural factors in your background might contribute to being rejected by members of other cultures?**
- G. **What personal qualities do you have that will help you establish interpersonal relationships with persons from other cultural groups? What personal qualities may be detrimental?**

## How Do You Relate to Various Groups of People in Society?

Using the exercise below, determine how you might relate to different members of the society. Described below are different levels of response that you might have toward a person.

### Levels of Response:

1. **Greet:** I feel I can ***greet*** this person warmly and welcome him or her sincerely.
2. **Accept:** I feel I can honestly ***accept*** this person as he or she is and be comfortable enough to listen to his or her problems.
3. **Help:** I would genuinely try to ***help*** this person with his or her problems as they might relate to or arise from the label-stereotype given to him or her.
4. **Background:** I feel I have the ***background*** of knowledge and/or experience to be able to help this person.

The following is a list of individuals. Read down the list and place a check mark by anyone you would **not** "greet" or would hesitate to "greet." Then move to response level 2, "accept," and follow the same procedure. Try to respond honestly, not as you think might be socially or professionally desirable. Your answers are only for your personal use in clarifying your initial reactions to different people.

Individual	1 - Greet	2 - Accept	3 - Help	4 - Background
<b>Ethnic/Racial</b>				
Mexican	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mexican American	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Native American	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vietnamese American	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
African American	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
White Anglo Saxon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Social Issues/Problems</b>				
Child abuser	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drug user	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prostitute	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gay/Lesbian	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unmarried expectant teenager	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alcoholic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Individual</b>	<b>1 - Greet</b>	<b>2 - Accept</b>	<b>3 - Help</b>	<b>4 - Background</b>
Undocumented individual	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Religious</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jew	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catholic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jehovah's Witness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Atheist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mormon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Physical/Mental Disability</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with deafness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with vision loss	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with cognitive challenges	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with psychological disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with cerebral palsy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with AIDS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Amputee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person with cancer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Political</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teamster Union member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ku Klux Klansman	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Member of a militia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. ***Before the next discussion group, find a difference in beliefs or values between you and a client that becomes apparent in a nutrition education session.*** Jot down examples on the Activity Worksheet, whether it was a difference rooted in cultural differences or not, and how it affected your session. Come to discussion ready to share.
3. ***How do we differ from our participants in our ideas about feeding children?*** Let's do a little research. Look for a few minutes to chat with four or five WIC participants, preferably who are culturally or ethnically different than you, and perhaps people you have seen before and with whom you have a good rapport. Say "I am doing a project for a class and I'd like to ask you a question. There is no right or wrong answer and you don't have to answer, but if you could, I'd appreciate it. Who should get to decide how much a child will eat at a meal? The parent or the child?" Chat about it with them. Don't try to change their minds. Let's see what kind of answers you get. Jot them down on the Activity Worksheet and bring to the discussion group.
4. ***Look for a situation where you are suggesting that a participant think about doing something and it turns out that her mother (or sister, aunt, or partner) has a different opinion on it.*** Describe the situation and how you handled the situation on the Activity Worksheet.
5. ***Can you accept that mainstream American culture is often future-oriented and that other cultures may often be present-oriented or thinking day to day?*** Does an awareness of this basic cultural difference help you see that dealing with the concerns people have now is most effective? How does this relate to behavior changes with eating and the idea of "prevention?"

Thinking about and doing these activities will prepare you for the discussion group.

---

***"Many counselors now realize that the cultural issues in counseling do not just pertain to clients from the recognized ethnic minority groups."***

***Rather . . . cultural differences are the rule rather than the exception.***

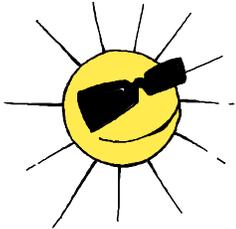
*Paul B. Pedersen, et al*  
*Counseling Across Cultures, 4th Ed.*

---

**Activity Worksheet**  
**Bright Ideas - Unit 11**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



**Stay aware of cultural differences**

**Differences I have noticed when talking with WIC clients: (Example: children eating in front of TV or children not being immunized--indicate if you think it is a cultural difference)**

**Cultural Difference?**

1.	YES	NO
2.	YES	NO
3.	YES	NO

**Explain how you have handled or want to handle these differences in the future:**

**Interview a WIC staff member and a client about "who should get to decide how much a child will eat at a meal? The parent or the child?" Jot down their answers as well as your beliefs.**

**My belief:**

**Your colleague's belief:**

**A WIC client's belief:**

**Describe a WIC situation where the client's family (husband, mother, grandmother, father, etc.) disagrees with the "usual" WIC recommendations for infant and child nutrition, introduction of solid foods, breastfeeding, weaning, etc.**

**How do you plan to handle this barrier to getting the client to make a behavior change?**

**Describe what would assist you the most to be more effective when working with differences in the WIC clinic: (Be prepared to share your ideas in the discussion time.)**



*Thank you for taking time to understand yourself  
and others around you!*

---

Discuss these ideas with your supervisor or in a staff discussion group. These activity pages and a discussion are to be done for completion of the module.