



COUNSELING:

A 10-Point Approach to Cultural Competence in Genetic Counseling

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What is cultural competence in genetic counseling?

Cultural competence is creating a healthcare system and workforce capable of delivering the highest-quality care to every patient regardless of race, ethnicity, religious, social, or language proficiency.

In genetic counseling, cultural competency spans language, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions so that counselors and clients can come together and discuss health concerns without cultural differences hindering the conversation. It builds respectful and responsive relationships and embraces diversity for positive health outcomes.

As genetic counselors, we have been trained in Rogerian and other counseling theories. Our roles are to provide relevant information and options to clients with varied medical conditions, symptoms, and histories. We help our clients use the information to make educated decisions, increase their awareness and utilization of resources and options, and improve their overall health.

Yet, to become culturally competent by learning all of the cultures, languages, countries, and beliefs is overwhelming. And, it might seem irrelevant in practice settings where clients and counselors seem similar to each other.

So how can genetic counselors become more culturally competent? They need to be knowledgeable and sensitive to diverse languages, cultures, health beliefs, and backgrounds. They need to be self-aware and having a willingness and curiosity for continuous learning.

As a general rule, cultural competence in genetic counseling is less about the “genetic” and more about the “counseling.” When you remove the barriers (especially those we aren’t conscious of), you can achieve successful outcomes for your clients. No matter one’s current perspective, the process of cultural competence is not just good for patients; it can also have

professional and personal rewards for genetic counselors.

With this article, we wish to articulate a simple acronym that will help all genetic counselors foster cultural competence in their sessions, regardless of their own cultural norms, practice settings, or client populations.

We suggest a 10-point approach for cultural competence in genetic counseling that we call **COUNSELING**. It includes:

- 1. Client-centered counseling.** This focus drives our concern for each patient as a unique cultural being who is also a member of a family, one or more communities, religions, and cultures. In the ongoing process of contracting, we ask questions to learn more about each client as an individual, and we use the client's responses to inform our genetic counseling.
- 2. Open.** We are willing to learn about diverse health beliefs and complementary medicine. We are able to integrate these concepts into the counseling session along with our discussion derived from Western medicine and genetics.
- 3. Unconditional positive regard.** This notion underscores our interactions with all clients. We do not judge clients for their actions or behaviors; we are there for them.
- 4. Non-directiveness.** Our agenda is to meet the client's agenda. This sometimes includes sum-

marizing the pros and cons of all the options and articulating back to the client what we have heard her or him say is the best course of action.

- 5. Self-awareness.** We identify our own strengths and weaknesses, and we resolve to continuously expand our understanding of, and interest in, interacting with people from different backgrounds and experiences. This will improve our professional expertise and makes us better people.
- 6. Empathy.** We use empathy in all genetic counseling sessions to understand the client's experiences, emotions, and perceptions of the world, and we determine how our client's behaviors and decisions are influenced.
- 7. Listen.** We let the client set the agenda, and we listen for what the client wants from the session. We ask open- and closed-ended questions and use responses to develop our agenda. As needed, we modify the agenda as we learn more from the client.
- 8. Inclusive.** We provide respectful and state-of-the-art genetic counseling and information to all clients. We use people-first language, principles of health literacy, and interpreters and translators to deliver genetic counseling information in a value-neutral manner.
- 9. Non-verbals.** We use non-ver-

bal and verbal cues to fully appreciate a client's perspectives, feelings, and understanding. We check our interpretations with the client to verify and modify our own understanding.

- 10. Genuine.** We are aware of our limitations and strengths. Growing our knowledge and experience is a goal, and we genuinely admit to our limitations as an opportunity to connect more deeply with the client.

Every genetic counselor has been trained in and is experienced in COUNSELING. This 10-point approach can help us work on our weak spots, gain confidence, and exercise humility. This continuous process of self-improvement can create a path to cultural competence, which we can then bring to the families we help. ●



Nancy Steinberg Warren, MS, CGC, has been involved in many aspects of genetic counseling, education, and training. With the 2009 Jane Engelberg Memorial Fellowship (JEMF) award, she focused on promoting greater appreciation of diversity and increasing cultural competence among genetic counselors. She hosts the online Genetic Counseling Cultural Competence Toolkit and organizes cultural competence workshops for healthcare providers.

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