

What is cultural competency?



1. What does cultural competency mean?

Cultural competency means being able to understand, appreciate, and interact effectively with people from cultures, backgrounds, and identities different from your own. It's about recognising that everyone's experiences, beliefs, and traditions may be different from yours- and adapting your behaviour and communication so you can interact constructively and respectfully.

Cultural competency includes four main components:

- **Cultural awareness:** recognising your own cultural identity, biases, stereotypes, and prejudices.
- **Cultural knowledge:** seeking and obtaining an educational foundation about diverse cultural worldviews, values, and practices.
- **Cultural skill:** the ability to conduct a cultural assessment, communicate effectively, and adapt behaviours to fit different cultural contexts.
- **Cultural attitude:** possessing a genuine openness, curiosity, and willingness to learn from others, rather than forcing conformity.

It's not about knowing everything about the culture, but about being willing to learn, ask questions, and avoid assumptions. It's a continuous process of improvement.



2. What does it look like in practice?

Cultural competency is not achieved through a single action. Organisations and individuals should implement a **combination of approaches**. This should create a more responsive, respectful, and effective system that can better identify and reduce health inequalities.

Communication:

- Using clear, inclusive language and avoiding jargon.
- Being aware of nonverbal communication differences.
- Checking understanding rather than assuming it.
- Using interpreters or cultural mediators.

Service design and delivery:

- Recognising that different groups may have different health beliefs, fears, and motivators.
- Ensuring materials and interventions are culturally relevant and accessible.
- Considering literacy levels, preferred languages, and community norms.
- Co-designing with communities.

Relationship building:

- Showing respect for cultural practices, traditions, and values.
- Taking the time to build trust, especially with communities that may have experienced discrimination or exclusion in the past.

Decision-making:

- Seeking input from diverse communities to avoid making assumptions.
- Involving community leaders, advocates, or cultural mediators where appropriate.

Self-reflection:

- Being open to feedback.
- Recognising when you might have misunderstood something and being willing to correct it.
- Continuously learning about different groups and experiences.



3. What can you do if you're in a frontline role?

- **Build trust through respectful communication:** use clear, plain language, check understanding without making people feel judged, be aware of different communication styles.
- **Be curious about people's beliefs and experiences:** ask open, respectful questions about what matters to them, avoid assumptions about health beliefs, family structures, or cultural practices.
- **Adapt your approach:** offer translated materials or interpreters where needed, adjust appointment times, settings, or methods to increase comfort and access.
- **Notice barriers and inequalities:** pay attention to patterns you see (who's attending, who isn't, and why), escalate concerns about access issues or cultural barriers to your team or managers.
- **Reflect on your own practice:** be open to feedback and consider how your own experiences shape the way you interpret behaviour.



4. What can you do if you're in a commissioner or service development role?

- **Use insights from communities:** engage community representatives early in the commissioning cycle, co-design services with groups most affected rather than designing them for them.
- **Ensure services are culturally accessible:** review specifications to include inclusive communication, use of interpreters, and culturally appropriate materials. Consider cultural norms when designing pathways.
- **Fund work that reduces inequalities:** commission providers who demonstrate strong cultural competency approaches and require them to collect and use demographic and equity-related data to identify gaps.
- **Build cultural competency into contracts:** include expectations around staff training, community engagement, and inclusive approaches. Monitor performance using real-world feedback, not just activity data.
- **Support the workforce:** encourage providers to invest in training and reflective practice. Recognise when teams need help engaging specific communities and connect them with local partners.



5. What can you do if you're in a strategic or system-level role?

- **Embed cultural competency into system priorities:** ensure strategies, policies, and frameworks explicitly consider diversity, inequalities, and inclusion. Integrate cultural competency into health equity goals and organisational values.
- **Ensure decisions consider diverse experiences:** use health equity impact assessments and culturally informed evidence, and question whether data reflects all communities- or if certain groups are missing from the picture.
- **Shape the system's culture:** model curiosity, empathy, and cultural humility in leadership behaviours. Encourage open discussion about inequalities, bias, and **structural barriers**.
- **Build strong relationships with diverse communities:** connect with local leaders, cultural groups, and voluntary sector organisations, and use these relationships to inform long-term planning, not just project-by-project work.
- **Support learning across organisations:** champion training, reflective practice, and cross-sector learning. Encourage teams to share best practice and challenges in engaging different communities.

Further reading

- Cultural adaptations to augment health and mental health services: a systematic review, BMC Health Services Research: [Cultural adaptations to augment health and mental health services: a systematic review | BMC Health Services Research | Springer Nature Link](#)
- Culturally appropriate care, Care Quality Commission: <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/adult-social-care/culturally-appropriate-care>
- Why cultural competency is important in healthcare, Skills for Health: <https://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/article/why-cultural-competency-is-important-in-healthcare/>
- Tips for social workers on cultural competence, Community Care: <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/content/news/tips-for-social-workers-on-cultural-competence>