

The Health Benefits of Understanding People from Other Cultures

by Youmasu J. Siewe, Ph.D, MPH.

Do you know that Arkansas has the fourth-fastest growing immigrant population and the fastest growing Hispanic population in the country? Do you know that your emotional state of health has to do with the degree to which you are aware of people and situations, and how you relate to these people and situations around you? Because America is one of the most multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious country in the world, your next-door neighbor, doctor, nurse, pharmacist, college professor, priest, pastor, company manager, nursing home attendant or farm aid, is likely to be from another country or culture. While it might be tolerable to see people from other cultures play subservient roles, do “dirty jobs” or perform roles undesired by the dominant culture, the reality is that things are changing very fast. The diverse immigrant cultures of today are taking advantage of the abundant educational and career opportunities in America and making faster moves into higher socio-economic classes in the country than ever before.

If demographic projections become accurate, we are told that by the year 2020, 45 percent of the nation's youth under 18 years of age will be minorities, and by 2050, almost half the nation's population will be non-white. The recent 2000 census reveals that Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the country. Things are changing!

America's growing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, while potentially one of the country's greatest “blessings”, can also cause problems. Diversity issues of today are more complex and challenging than they were in the past. History tells us that diversity in the early 1800s and the 1920s was a result of waves of immigrants from Western, Northern, and Eastern Europe. These immigrants came from different nations, practiced different religions, but were readily absorbed into the mainstream of American life, creating phenomena which historians called the “melting pot”. This phenomenon was successful in producing good health, economic growth and social harmony in the country, because generations of these immigrants worked, lived, and played side-by-side with other Americans.

The newer cultures of today are different. They are mostly non-European, want to retain the cultural identities of their native countries while being a part of the dominant culture, thus creating newer phenomena, called “salad bowl” cultures. Though some in the salad bowl culture are making social and economic progress, many still have to overcome challenges which include but not limited to: segregated living communities, higher unemployment rate, limited access to health services, social isolation and disrespect for being culturally different.

Realizing that most of these newer cultures are here to stay and are growing, makes it necessary to find better ways to understand them. A suggestion that works well is to try to challenge ourselves to create opportunities to genuinely talk with those who are different from us. It might be easy to read a book, watch television programs about other cultures, or just remain hopeful that one may never have “anything” to do with “them”.

Reading books and watching television programs can be educational, but are never good substitute for understanding those who are different. To improve your emotional state of health, it is important to understand the reality of the ever-growing number of people from other cultures; most of them are here to stay. Remember: your next-door neighbor, doctor, nurse, college professor, accountant, plant manager, pastor, priest, or even your son/daughter's spouse is likely to be somebody from another culture. Cultural stereotypes don't work. It is a win-win investment to respect, legally hire or work with, and make efforts to genuinely understand those from other cultures.

For questions or comments about this article, call Dr. Siewe at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences-AHEC South Arkansas in El Dorado at (870) 881 4429, or send an email to ysiewe@ahcsa.uams.edu. To read our articles on the web, go to: <http://www.ahcsa.uams.edu/health.asp>

