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 Cultural Awareness During a Public Health Emergency

Cultural awareness can be seen in many areas in society including the workplace, banks, restaurants, hospitals, and even in a public health emergency. Cultural awareness is defined as “the foundation of communication and it involves the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions,” according to writers Stephanie Quappe and Giovanna Cantatore. There are levels of understanding cultural awareness. These levels include: awareness of visible cultural traits, taking notice of subtle cultural differences, increasing analysis of cultural differences, and understanding how another culture feels from an insider prospective. During a public health emergency, these levels of understanding are important to use especially when treating or trying to deescalate a situation. Awareness, approach, acceptance of differences, respect, and the ability to adapt are all important topics to think and perform. The many cultures seen in Los Angeles County alone should encourage all those involved in public health to be able to learn and respect everyone’s culture.

There are ways to promote and teach cultural awareness in order to make a difference in a community or population. The internet has been a popular place where public health emergencies have been captured and recorded. Social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and more are used to expose and promote cultural awareness. Other tools such as community gatherings, training, books, sit-ins, and more are used as well. One of the most important ways to promote cultural awareness is the training aspect. In the workplace, all employees should be able to respect their co-worker’s cultural differences.

Los Angeles has one of the biggest populations in the country. This city holds about ten million residents. Among this population includes many cultures, languages, practices, beliefs, and more. Working for public health in Los Angeles County requires acceptance and understanding. This county has two-hundred and twenty-four spoken known languages. The top two most common languages are English and Spanish. Because of this statistic, it is important for public health workers to be able to communicate to the best of their ability, or have a translator readily available. First responders are a big part of a public health emergency. It is important that they are trained on cultural awareness and how it saves lives. Specifically, in Los Angeles County, first responders should be able to treat, help, and provide assistance to all cultures. There are roughly twenty-seven hundred firefighters, twelve hundred EMTs/paramedics, and ten thousand police officers. There are many first responders in this county and it is important that they are diverse. According to the U.S. Census, the leading race amongst first responders is White, then Hispanic or Latino, then African American, Asian, “unknown”, and finally American Indian and Alaska Native. This statistical evidence concludes that there is barely any diversity seen amongst first responders.

Recent events and public health emergencies have provided insight on how culturally aware our society is. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that those who reside in lower income communities were harshly affected. Black and Latino residents in Los Angeles county were the top two to suffer from the pandemic. Racial and ethnic disparities in public health lead to lower income communities suffering. The health disparities amongst lower income communities are significant. There are little to no resources readily available to these communities and are often avoided. According to L.A. Times, “Between Jan. 29 and Feb. 11, for every 100,000 unvaccinated residents in each racial or ethnic group, 74 Latino and 60 Black residents were hospitalized for COVID-19, while 43 white and 30 Asian American residents were.” Some reasons for health disparities include the lack of education, resources, health insurance, benefits, funds, programs, and more.

Cultural awareness has been an important topic due to recent events. Events like the “Stop Asian Hate” movement, “Black lives Matter” movement, and Latino hate have been brought to light. The “Stop Asian Hate” movement began March 2021. Their goal is to end hate crimes against Asian Americans since xenophobia and racism got worse due to racist remarks related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The “Black Lives Matter” movement began in 2013 as a hashtag that progressed to a protest in 2020 due to the George Floyd incident. There were nineteen deaths related to this movement. The goal is to end police brutality, fight for equal rights, demand equality for mental health, and more. Another topic that has been brought to light is Latino hate that involves hate crimes against Latinx, racist remarks regarding undocumented individuals, violence against undocumented individuals, street vendor harassment, and the lack of assistance and resources to this culture. These racially motivated events were due to the lack of cultural awareness in the community. The misrepresentation of these cultures led to disrespect, violence, and inequality. Social media was and still is a big resource for these movements and injustices. Applications like Twitter and Instagram were and still are tools to promote these injustices. Racial discrimination is a big reason why there are health disparities and movements trying to make a change.

Cultural awareness creates equal opportunities and trust which is important during a public health emergency. It offers different viewpoints and solutions while also creating meaningful interactions. It helps the community thrive by making it a safe place to learn and grow. In order for there to be a change there must be training, understanding, acceptance, awareness, and promotion. Without cultural awareness, leaves room for more injustice, racial discrimination, health disparities, and unequal opportunities. Public health emergencies should not be a place for these injustices and racial discrimination.

 What did I learn?

Throughout my experience in this internship and extensive research, it has provided me with so much knowledge and realization. I have developed a passion in the cultural awareness topic, and plan to promote it in every way possible. I have decided to begin learning about other cultures to make myself culturally aware. After all, I do plan on pursuing a career in the medical field, and I want to create a safe space for everyone. Inclusion has become something I strive for. At one point of our lives we have all faced a time where we felt abnormal and not included. This is something many face in their everyday lives. Whether it is in their community, a public health emergency, a bank, or a hospital, people are mistreated for being different. Individuals should not have to suffer consequences for being different. I also realized that cultural awareness is not only about one’s culture/religion/beliefs, but it can also be your socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, education level, age, and so much more. This made me realize that these are some things people are discriminated for. It is saddening to think that even in a public health emergency, people who are different are mistreated for things they cannot control. Learning about what goes into cultural awareness and public health emergencies has provided me with a better understanding of why it is so important. I learned that Los Angeles County is huge and requires individuals who are culturally aware in all aspects of culture. Ten million residents who identify in any way should be accounted for when in a public health emergency. This topic is a necessity in order to help our community thrive. Some skills that I have learned in the process of this internship includes, better communication skills, prioritizing time to have documents ready, organization, and discipline. Thank you for this opportunity, I will be using my newly acquired skills in my future workplace.