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Cultural Competence Module 13
Cultural Knowledge – Causation of Illness

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Module 13: Cultural Knowledge – Causation of Illness

Module Estimated Time: 30-35 minutes

Statement of Purpose:

The purpose of this module is to address culturally-based beliefs about causation of illness. The module will present three approaches and provide specific examples of beliefs as well as of remedies that may exist in specific cultural groups. Students will also have a chance to share their cultural beliefs that they may have in their family, as well as family remedies to deal with particular illnesses.

Objectives:

Upon the completion of this module, the learner will:

1. Be able to define the distinction between illness and disease
2. Be able to indentify three different culturally-based beliefs about causation of illness
3. Be aware of at least two specific cultural beliefs about causation of illness that differ from the mainstream Anglo culture

Terminology

Health Beliefs
Folk Medicine
Alternative Medicine
Western Medicine
Biomedicine
Personalistic
Naturalistic
Simultaneous
Diagnosis
Disease
Humoral balance
Acupuncture
Obstruction
Imbalance
Parasites
Third Person Intervention
Evil Eye
Malnutrition
Voodoo
Witchcraft
Susto
Vitalistic

1. **Disease vs. Illness (Introductory Lecture)**
   Discuss the difference between Disease and Illness and introduce three different approaches of interpreting causation of illness

Time: 3 minutes

Materials: None

Rarely do people make a distinction between illness and disease, often giving the two words an arbitrary assignment of meaning. However, although these two words seem to mean the same thing, they cannot be used interchangeably.

Disease is an objectively measurable pathological condition that impairs the normal function of the body. It is possible to have a disease without being symptomatic (e.g., tooth decay, or a genetic disease or an infection that may be asymptomatic during its incubation period).

To the contrary, although the word "illness" is generally used in lieu of "disease," the term specifically refers to an individual personal experience of disease. Illness is about how the body responds to the disease (e.g., anorexia, lethargy, depression).

Because illness is about the body's response, this can also refer to psychological and spiritual response. Perceptions around how our bodies respond are very cultural. Hence for a health professional who treats patients form different cultures, it is important to understand the variations of beliefs that exist about what causes a person to become ill.

2. The roots of Illness (Lecture)

Time: 15 minutes

Materials: Laptop/Computer
LCD Projector/Screen
PowerPoint of Module 13

Preparation: Before class, prepare laptop, screen and LCD projector. Have remote control at hand to advance PowerPoint Slides.

Slide 1

Patients' health beliefs can have a very profound impact on clinical care. They can interfere with preventive efforts, and delay or even complicate the provision of medical care by the use of folk medicine, which may be sometimes beneficial, and sometimes toxic.

A few dominant theories of illness causation can be categorized in three approaches: Personalistic; Naturalistic; and Biomedicine.

Slide 2

In the Personalistic approach, illness is believed to be caused by the intervention of supernatural beings, or by the intervention of human beings that have special powers. These interventions can therefore come from a deity, a spirit, a dead ancestor, a sorcerer or a witch.

Under the Personalistic explanation, illness is seen as a result of the acts or wishes of supernatural beings and forces. Typical causes of illness can be: the intrusion of foreign object in the body by supernatural means, spirit possession, loss of spirit or damage to the spirit, and bewitching.

Recovery from an illness due to Personalistic causes involves the use of ritual and symbolisms performed by beings with special powers.

Many people in Asia and Latin America believe in Personalistic causation of illness, as well as many Native Americans.

A common type of soul loss in Latin America is the "evil eye" or *"mal de ojo"* in Spanish. The illness results from the perception that someone stronger can harm or weaken other people (e.g., if a strong person stares at a weak person, the eyes of the strong person can drain the power or soul of the weaker person.)

The traditional cure to this in rural Mexico involves a *curandero* sweeping a raw chicken egg up and down the body to absorb away the power of the Evil Eye that a person has received. The egg is then broken into a glass to be "read" to see if the cure was successful. The shape of yolk can even indicate the gender of the person who instilled the Evil Eye into the victim.

Slide 3

In the Naturalistic Approach, a person's health is closely tied up with nature and its environment. A proper balance and harmony must be maintained for a person to remain well. Three widely practiced naturalistic approaches to health are Humoral, Ayurvedic and Vitalistic.

- The Humoral approach is widespread in Asia and Latin America. To maintain humoral balance, one must pay attention to an appropriate diet and activity. Imbalances of hot and cold will cause illness of the body.
- Ayurveda is an ancient naturalistic approach from India. Therapies in the Ayurvedic approach involve building a healthy metabolic system, good digestion and proper excretion through use of a vast array of herbs, minerals and dietary prescriptions. Ayurveda also includes yoga, massage, exercise and meditation. The Ayurvedic practice is closely connected with religion and mythology.
- Vitalism is based on the belief that illness is the result of imbalance in the vital energies that distinguish living from non-living matter. Western medical tradition founded by Hippocrates refers to these vital forces with the four temperaments and humours. Qui and Prana are the terms used in Eastern tradition. If the energy flows harmoniously within a person, then their health is deemed good. Illness occurs when this energy gets interrupted or disrupted. The ancient art of acupuncture in China is an example of this system to restore the *yin* and *yang* when they go out of balance.

Slide 4

Biomedicine, on the other hand, refers to the "body-as-machine." This is a powerful way of conceptualizing the body in Western medicine and predominantly in the Anglo culture. The core belief of Biomedicine is that diagnosis and treatment should be based on scientific data. Biomedicine is not so much concerned with the practice of medicine, rather with the research aspect. The results of this research lead to new drugs and molecular understanding of the mechanisms that underlie disease.

The maintenance of health is carried out by scientific mechanisms such as immunizations or medical procedures such as annual screenings (e.g. mammograms, Prostate exams, etc.)

Western medicine today is becoming more and more influenced by the theories of alternative medicine combined with several approaches of biomedicine. The current practice of acupuncture or chiropractic in Western Medicine is an example of this fusion.

3. **What approach do you adhere to? (Group of 4 Activity)**
Students will engage in a discussion that will allow them to share some anecdotal stories about folk medicine in the cultural beliefs

Time: 10 minutes

Materials: Handout for Module 13

Slide 4

Before activity-
1) Instruct students to form groups of four
2) Give a handout for Module 13 to all students
4) Instruct to fill in at least one area with an illness that is caused by one of the three approaches and the remedy used to cure the illness.

During Activity – Students share a belief around illness with group and write it on the handout under the approach that best aligns with the example given.

4. **Learning about Folk Medicine (Whole Class Discussion)**
Instructor will elicit students' feedback base on previous activity

Time: 3 minutes

Materials: None

Ask two or three students to share one of the example used with the rest of class.

5. **Final Thoughts on Illness and Its Causation (Closing Lecture)**

Time: 2 minutes

Materials: None

Close this lesson with these points:

- Holistic care takes into account the physical, the mental/emotional and the social wellbeing of a person.
- How we see health or illness is different based on our cultural filters and values.
- Some see health and illness as a result of the harmony or lack of harmony with nature, mind, body and spirit; others see health directly correlated with personal responsibility regarding diet, rest, exercise and prevention.
- Western Medicine believes in the omnipotence of technology and science, and the maintenance of health and prevention through such mechanisms.

- Luckily, the health beliefs of culture all over the world are informed by some combination of these theories. All theories of health and illness help patients make meaning of the bodily experiences, allowing them to have a sense of self-control.

- American medical professionals and their patients across many cultures should negotiate an understanding about what causes illness and how to best deal with it. In order to arrive at this point of negotiation, professionals practicing Western Medicine need to value the ideas and beliefs that patients bring into the medical setting with an open mind and a non-judgmental attitude. A treatment option that considers the patient's cultural beliefs opens the door to a more effective therapeutic experience and a higher level of trust that will help elevate the quality of health for that patient.

Module 13
Beliefs Around Illness and How to Deal With It

Origins or Causes of Illness	Description of This Illness	Beliefs Surrounding This Illness	Some Common Treatments for This Illness
PHYSICAL			
SPIRITUAL			
MAGICAL			
HUMORAL IMBALANCE			
BLOCKAGE OF ENERGY FLOW			
OTHER			