



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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## Understanding Arab Culture and Customs Related to Recovery

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# Understanding Arab Culture and Customs Related to Recovery

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# Objective of the Session

- To foster awareness and understanding of Arab/ Arab American culture as it relates to behavioral health and as it relates to access and effectiveness of treatment approaches.
- To provide service practitioners with best practices that may inform their work with Arab American clients.

# Definition of Arab Americans

- Members of an immigrant group in the U.S. who can trace ethnic origins to one or more of the following Arabic speaking countries:
  - Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen.

# Statistics on Arab Americans

- US Census produced first report on Arab ancestry in 2000
  - About 1.2 million people in the US reported an Arab ancestry.
  - People from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt accounted for about three-fifths of the Arab population
  - About half of the Arab population was concentrated in only five states—California, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York
  - Proportion of the population that was Arab was highest in Michigan (1.2% of total population).

# Historical Waves of Arab Immigrants to the US

## – The First Wave: 1875 – 1925

- Village farmers or artisans
- Mainly young Christian men from Mt. Lebanon
- Immigrated for economic opportunities
- Did not identify as “Arab” but rather as members of a kinship group, religious group, or village

# Historical Waves of Arab Immigrants to the US

## – The Second Wave: 1945 – Present

- Christians and Muslims from broader range of countries
- Large numbers of relatively well-off, highly educated professionals (lawyers, professors, teachers, engineers, and doctors)
- Attracted to US for economic opportunities
- Driven from homelands due to social and political changes

# Aspects of Arab Culture

## ■ 'ayb

- Arabic term referring to “shame.”
- The use of the term and concept is prominent in Arab culture, highlighting the importance of reputation and honor.

(Wikan, 1984)



# Aspects of Arab Culture

## ■ Kalam Innas

- Arabic phrase referring to “the people’s talk.”
- Significant part of Arab socialization which guides behavior whereby group members, before taking action, are encouraged to consider what other people in the community might say about their actions.

# Aspects of Arab Culture

## *Basic Beliefs*

- Islam as a way of life (Submission to Allah)—social, economic, spiritual, and political
- Dependence on God
  - Feeling of dependency on God
  - Fear of God's punishment on earth
  - Respect for tradition and for the past
  - Politeness for all and generosity

# Perception of Mental Illness

- Punishment from God for the sins of the individual or his/her family; touched by jinn, or ridden by the devil.
- Mental illness is shunned
- Reluctance to send a disturbed family member to an asylum or treatment out of desire not to recognize or disclose the problem.
- Substance use disorders seen as controllable

# Non-Recognition of Chronic Disease

- Stigma or 'ayb oriented. Chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes are considered hereditary and reflect on the whole family.
- Fear of reducing marriageability of children by disclosure of these kinds of illnesses.
- Implications for substance use disorders as disease.

# Belief in Unseen Forces

- There is an acceptance among many Arabs of unseen forces that may cause disease (jinn, evil eye)
- Jinn are feared as malevolent and capricious spirits that may cause illness and other evil.
- Evil eye can be understood in the context of fearing the envy of others which may also be the cause of sickness or even death.

# Deep Seated Respect for Age and Expertise

- Respect increases with age and authority
- Arab patients tend to submit to authority without questioning
- Perception that doctor is incompetent will not result in an open confrontation/discussion with the doctor. Instead will result in noncompliance with directions.

# Concept of Time

- Time is not linear and not constricted.
- Lateness is accepted and anger about it is not understood.
- Insha' Allah—not “tomorrow at 9:30am” but “insha allah I’ll see you before lunch.”

# Special Acknowledgement

Arab Community Center for Economic  
and Social Services (ACCESS), *Guide  
to Arab Culture: Health Care Delivery  
to the Arab American Community*  
(1999)