



# Junior Officer Advisory Group

## Readiness & Deployment Committee

### Behavioral Health Team

# Practicing Wellness

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## Practicing Culture as a Protective Factor

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As public health practitioners, we are trained on the importance of integrating culture in our encounters with people we serve during our everyday practice and while on deployments. As a social worker, weaving cultural experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities represents a foundational block of my practice, leading to treatment conceptualization and therapeutic engagement with individuals and families.

Culture plays a fundamental role for us, too. Culture permeates our lives. Culture impacts our sense of self-identity, how we perceive the world around us, and our sense of social connectedness. But how do we define culture? The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines culture as "a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 2001)."

Research demonstrates that feeling connected to our self-identified cultural group can enhance our self-esteem and self-worth—that in the face of adversity, practicing culture can serve as a protective factor. We all have various levels of engagement with our ethnic exploration, which is the degree to which we have explored our ethnic identities. You may be familiar with one part of your family background but are curious about other cultural aspects of your family history. Our identity resolution entails having a clear sense of the meaning of ethnicity in our lives. How much do ethnic practices and rituals play a role in your life? Do you share your cultural self with your partner, children, friends, or coworkers? Finally, our identity affirmation is grounded in the positive feelings we experience about our own cultural groups.

With our busy lives and responsibilities, it can be challenging to find ways and opportunities to practice our culture. As a bicultural French American, I try to embed the French culture in my interactions with my children, sitting down with them to read a story in French or looking at images from my region in the South of France. Something as simple as cooking a dish my mother made for me as a child or getting a "chausson aux pommes" at the local bakery can be grounding. Thinking about my ancestors, their lives, and my on-going connection to them can provide solace when facing challenges too. Personally, culture transcends country boundaries and I often find a deep connection with other individuals who immigrated to the United States as children. While we may not be from the same country of origin, I feel a connection to them and their experiences. I make sure to share those narratives with my children who were born in the United States.

Whichever culture you feel connected to or are curious to learn more about, explore it! Cultural practice can nourish us, protect us when experiencing challenges and adversity, and opens up a world of self-exploration.

Conroy, K. & Sanchez A. (date). Harnessing cultural identity as a protective factor in minority mental health: Applications to Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://div12.org/harnessing-cultural-identity-as-a-protective-factor-in-minority-mental-health-applications-to-children-and-families/#:~:text=The%20protective%20role%20of%20cultural,et%20al.%2C%202013>). January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

UNESCO. (2001). Cultures Definition. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/en/culture>. January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023