

A Perspective: Being in BHRS

As a Muslim Arab-American growing up in Post 9-11 America, I have definitely faced some challenges with regard to my identity and how people perceive me. The headscarf I wear automatically gives many people the right to assume things about me.

The number one question I get when I meet someone new is “where are you from?” I proceed to answer Virginia and this is usually followed by a sense of hesitation from the questioner who then asks “where are you originally from?” With a smile, I inform him/her that my parents are originally from Egypt but I was born and raised in the U.S. It’s interesting because most people are surprised that I don’t have an accent while a few inform me that I do! I have gotten used to the questions and am always open to talking to people in order to break

down the stereotypes.

As I pursue my career in counseling psychology I am aware of the impact of perception - future clients may have certain views about me and may be wondering if I will be able to understand him/her because I may appear quite different from him/her. Therefore I hope to bring what I am learning from my internship here at BHRS (as a Health Disparities Intern) to the counseling/therapy field. I have realized that despite my heightened attention to biases and assumptions subjected towards me, I have also done the same to others unknowingly.

For example, I have always assumed that clients and consumers are completely different from “normal people” and that they must be in their own world unable to function in “real life.” My participation in

the NAMI Provider Education Course has shown and proven to me that many mental health consumers are not so different after all. They struggle with the very same issues in life that I struggle with. In addition, they also have to deal with the bombardment of assumptions imposed on them.

By hearing people’s stories and really getting to know some consumers, I re-affirmed my belief against judging someone automatically. I learned that it is important to acknowledge my own assumptions and biases, and set them aside when interacting or working with them. Being a culturally competent practitioner is necessary and a critical skill to have - this will allow empathy to create safety and authenticity and hopefully will shift how I see my work.

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