

## **Cross-cultural and cross-national couples**

### **What is a cross-cultural couple?**

A cross-cultural couple is a couple in which the partners were raised and socialized in different cultures. This means there may be differences in one or more of these cultural dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, language, geographical region, etc.

### **What is a cross-national couple?**

A cross-national couple is a couple in which partners have different nationalities or, if they do have the same nationality, one has gained it as a result of immigration. There can be partners who have different nationalities but share many similar cultural dimensions (ethnicity for example), and there can be couples who are not cross-national, meaning they share the same nationality, but who differ significantly in their cultural dimensions.

### **Are cross-cultural and cross-national couples different from other couples?**

Cross-cultural couples are different from other couples in the sense that they have to deal more explicitly with individual differences. Cross-national couples are unique in that they also have to work with and understand the experience of immigration. This means that at least one partner interacts with a local and national community in which they were not raised and socialized and subsequently has, or has had in the past, to deal with issues of identity and belonging in a new context.

### **How are cross-cultural and cross-national couple impacted by the partners having different cultures and/or nationalities?**

Partners may have to explore and learn the significance of that some concepts, habits, traditions, and values have for each of them, sometimes at different times in their life. For example: How do we express love? How do we offer support? What does it mean to get along? What do we celebrate? What do we teach our children? What does it mean to trust each other? How do we relate to our extended families and friends?

Partners in cross-national couples may have to learn and adjust to how the interactions with the local community and the host country impact the immigrant partner and, as a result, the couple. Different stages in life can present different issues.

### **How can therapy help?**

A culturally-aware therapist can help a couple identify its specific strengths and areas of weakness and explore and reflect on the particular challenges, but also the enrichment, and brought by their having been raised, schooled, and socialized in different cultures and/or countries. Therapy can help them reach a deeper understanding of each other's cultural differences and find ways to bridge them. Sometimes there are differences that are not a source of tension within the couple, but can become problematic when the couple interacts with society or can be seen as problematic by the extended families or by friends. Therapy can also help a couple reflect on their particular experience of bi-culturalism, how this informs the family they may create together, and how this impacts their families of origin.