

## STRATEGIES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The following are suggestions for facilitating the communication process between health care providers and the patient population.

### **Provide a safe environment:**

- Be aware of situations and settings that are uncomfortable.
- Reduce power dynamics.
- Informal settings usually allow more open communication because it makes patients feel more at ease.
- Private settings generally contribute to feelings of safety.

### **Focus on understanding:**

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Be nonjudgmental.
- Do not express disagreement or conflicting perceptions immediately.

### **Explore the possibility that what is presented may not be the main issue:**

- Listen to others and give them time to tell their story in their own way and words.
- Trust must develop before others share their vulnerability.
- Trust is earned so it develops over time.
- Root or underlying issues may not surface for weeks, months, or years.

### **Acknowledge differences and different experiences:**

- Avoid saying "I know how you feel" as it is always untrue.
- Most cultural minorities are more skilled in the majority culture than members of the majority culture are skilled in minorities' cultures.
- Ignorance or lack of experience can be seen as an opening instead of a roadblock.
- Victims of discrimination do not believe that members of the majority culture understand discrimination.

### **Focus on similarities or common ground:**

- Work
- Families
- Leisure
- Basic human concerns

### **Be aware of differences in nonverbal communication patterns:**

- Eye contact
- Space
- Touching

- Tone of voice
- Facial expressions

**Treat all people with dignity and respect regardless of diversity issues:**

- Keep an open mind
- Keep it simple
- Speak to the person in a polite manner
- Avoid making judgments and assumptions
- Avoid ethnic, racial and gender jokes

**Respect all people as adults who have the right to make decisions freely:**

- Avoid dictating and giving orders
- Avoid giving commands
- Avoid using slang terms
- Some words are considered “privileged” and only members of that group can respectfully use them
- Above all, keep a sense of humor!

**Observation:** It is always best to observe the behaviors of the group and follow their lead.

**High- and Low-Context Cultures:** Communication in high-context cultures depends heavily on the context, or nonverbal aspects of communication; low-context cultures depend more on explicit, verbally expressed communication. A highly literate, well read culture is considered a low-context culture, as it relies heavily on information communicated explicitly by words.

**Nonverbal Communication:** In low-context cultures, such as in academic communities, communication is mostly verbal and written. Very little information in this culture is communicated nonverbally. In high-context cultures, much of the communication process occurs nonverbally. Body language, status, tonality, relationships, the use of silence, and other factors communicate meaning. ***Studies show that more than 60% of communication is nonverbal and will be remembered long after your actual words.*** Many cultures determine the seriousness of your message by your actions and emotions during your delivery.

**Eye Contact:** Most U.S. children are taught to look at the teacher or parent when they are being scolded and during interpersonal communication in general. However, in some cultures, looking down is considered a sign of respect for the person who is scolding them. Many adult Americans regard someone who does not look them in the eye as untrustworthy. However, some cultures may regard direct eye contact as confrontational. It is often considered to be rude or aggressive to look into someone’s eyes for more than 4 or 5 seconds.

**Smiling:** Rather than being a sign of friendliness, some cultures regard smiling as false, overbearing, or worse. Smiles may disguise embarrassment, mask bereavement, and barely conceal rage, while happiness may hide behind a straight face. Do not define the acceptance of a presentation to a group that seems inexpressive as being a failure. Audiences from different

cultures express acceptance in unfamiliar ways (e.g., straight faced, eyes closed, heads in a bowed position). A smile and a head nod may not indicate acceptance or agreement. It is often a polite gesture, and not one of agreement or understanding.

**Laughing:** In some cultures, laughing is an expression of concern, embarrassment, or distress. This may lead to a false interpretation by many Americans. Do not assume someone is laughing at you; they may be expressing distress regarding the situation.

**Touching:** In many cultures, it is considered improper to touch a stranger. In one study, conversations in outdoor cafes in different countries were observed. The number of casual touches (of self or the other party) per hour were counted. A total of 180 touches per hour were recorded in San Juan, Puerto Rico; two per hour in Florida, and zero per hour in London. When in doubt, do not touch, other than a formal handshake. Do not touch with the left hand, which in many cultures is considered taboo.

**Space:** In the United States, many people unconsciously stand an arm's length apart. In some Asian cultures, people stand even farther apart. In some Hispanic or Latino cultures, people are comfortable standing closer to each other than arm's length. As always, you should observe the behaviors of the group and follow their lead.

**Time:** Different cultures have different concepts of punctuality. When some people agree to meet at a certain time, 8:00 for example, they see 8:00 as a displaced point in time when the meeting is scheduled to begin, and anyone who arrives after 8:00 is considered late. Other cultures see the meeting time as a diffused point in time, and anyone who arrives between 8:00 and 8:30 is considered punctual. However, do not interpret this as license for you or the team to be late. You must be on time, but you must also be prepared to be delayed.

**Verbal Communication:** Avoid use of technical phrases, jargon, and acronyms. Explain the meaning of technical language and acronyms throughout your conversation or presentation. Pause between sentences and ask, "Any questions so far?" Do not wait until the end of your presentation. Do not be afraid to use facial expressions, body language and other signs of emotion to enhance your message.

**Emotional Responses:** Emotional responses will vary among different cultures. While some cultures will not react emotionally to your messages, others will. Do not become concerned if there are emotional outbursts. Be prepared to compassionately acknowledge the emotional impact that your message may have on individuals.

**Interpreters:** Get to know the interpreter in advance. Your phrasing, accent, pace, and idioms are important to a good interpreter. Review technical terms in advance. Ensure a shared understanding of terms in particular and your message in general before you speak. Speak slowly and clearly. Try to phrase your thoughts into single ideas of two sentences; work this out with the interpreter in advance. Be careful with numbers. Write out important numbers to ensure understanding. Watch your body language. Clients will observe your body language while your words are being converted into their language. The interpreter will not be able to transmit your inflections and tone, so you must find other ways to underscore your message and why they should believe what you are saying. Watch their eyes. Watch to see if the interpreter's words seem to register with them.

**Humor:** Avoid humor and jokes. American humor often depends on word plays that do not translate well. Rely on a pleasant facial expression. Use visuals where possible. A picture really is worth a thousand words; the universal language of pictures can make your job easier. Spend time to let the interpreter become acquainted with your visual material.

**Summary Tips:**

1. **Communicate respect.**
2. **Do not judge.**
3. **Recognize your own assumptions.**
4. **Show empathy.**
5. **Demonstrate flexibility.**
6. **Tolerate ambiguity.**
7. **Value diversity.**
8. **Be careful with humor; it may be misunderstood.**

**Resources:**

<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/xcolcomm.htm>

[http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_subject.asp?code=CCC](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_subject.asp?code=CCC)

<http://www.guidancechannel.com/default.aspx?M=a&index=1324&cat=50>