AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Disaster Resource Network

Guide to Cultural Awareness

FOR DISASTER RESPONSE VOLUNTEERS

Every person has a culture: The many customs and beliefs that shape our perspectives and create a lens through which we see others. We are our own experts in the cultural experiences that influence our lives. Yet, when we try to communicate with people from other cultures, we need to ask ourselves if we are doing so in an effective and appropriate manner. It is impossible to become an expert in every culture. Even so, we can become more culturally aware, understand our own cultural influences, and respect and value differences of other individuals and groups.

Every day provides an opportunity for us to seek out experiences and opportunities to learn about cultures that are different from our own. Engaging in continuous learning about cultural commonalities and differences can help us expand our ability to communicate effectively with people, especially during challenging times.

If we strive to learn from and about those with whom we interact, we will naturally become more culturally informed.

TIPS FOR CULTURALLY INFORMED COMMUNICATIONS

Think beyond race and ethnicity.
Opportunities to expand our cultural understanding exist everywhere, especially when we consider culture beyond its association with ethnicity. Culture is central to our identity and, as such, may be seen or unseen by others. Culture is shaped by personal experiences that may include: ethnic and racial identity, religion, age, educational level, body size, heritage and family tradition, physical and cognitive abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, and geographic and socio-economic experiences.

Think outside your own box.
We are influenced by our own values, beliefs, biases, and life experiences. We need to carefully consider how our perspectives affect our understanding of other cultures and avoid making assumptions about others based on our own experiences. Explore your experiences of power, privilege, and marginality to discover how these experiences could impact your interactions with others. Becoming culturally aware starts with recognizing the limitations of our own cultural knowledge.

Experience culture.
Consider experiential ways that you can learn about other cultures and endeavor to participate in activities that may not be familiar to you. When possible, take part in social, community, and educational activities like viewing films and reading books, attending faith-based services, festivals, parades, concerts, sporting events, art exhibits, workshops, and lectures. Make relationships within the community prior to a crisis.

Use language that evokes images of people actively engaged in life when working with people with disabilities.
Avoid phrases that suggest helplessness or tragedy. For example, "Bob uses a wheelchair" versus "Bob is in a wheelchair."

Listen carefully.
Hearing is not necessarily listening. Our own perceptions, biases and expectations sometimes make it difficult to really listen to and comprehend the overt and covert messages. Be mindful to focus on and identify the information being conveyed.

TIP

Gender is an important factor in many cultures. For example, in some cases men will feel uncomfortable talking with or learning from women, and vice versa. Learn how the genders communicate and interact.

Learn by asking.

People feel respected when others are genuinely interested in learning about their views and perspectives. Consider incorporating questions into conversations that demonstrate your desire to learn more about others' cultural experiences. Use simple or open-ended questions that encourage dialogue. For example, "What do you think?," "How can I be of assistance to you?," "What information is important for me to know about you and your culture?," "If I was a member of your community, how would I most likely react to/cope with this situation?," and "What does 'help' look like here?"

Avoid insensitive comments.

In group contexts, individuals sometimes make insensitive and hurtful comments about others (e.g., jokes, slurs). Do not reinforce this behavior. If comfortable in the group context, make known your discomfort with what has been said and ask that no more insensitive comments be made.

Tune in to non-verbal behaviors.

Sometimes, behaviors can provide more details about how someone is reacting to a situation than what they may be comfortable saying. It is important to recognize welcoming behaviors as well as those that may be defensive so that you can adjust your approach accordingly. Similarly, be aware of your own body language. Does standing while others are sitting demonstrate authority or aggressiveness? Try to match others' preferences for personal space and body positioning.

Expand your comfort zone.

It is likely that there will be individuals or cultural groups with whom you do not have experience working. Acknowledge this challenge and make an effort to learn as much as possible about the individual or group to build your confidence and benefit your outreach. Ask questions to make it clear that you want to learn more and deliver information in a way that is useful.

Make local connections.

What community-based organizations and venues are respected and trusted by those with whom you work? Organizations or groups like social clubs, advocacy groups, religious institutions or other spiritual groups, civic groups, unions, colleges, and universities can help you deliver your messages in a forum that is relevant to your audience. In some cases, you may want to partner with leaders from these organizations or groups to help you communicate even more effectively.

TIP

Recognize that common colloquialisms, slang terms and cliché phrases can be culturally specific and may be confusing.

Exchange stories.

Storytelling and personal sharing are important communication techniques that transcend most cultures. Consider sharing relevant personal stories as a way to start a conversation or build rapport.

Respect language preferences.

Before approaching a new group of people, consider whether the materials you have to offer or your presentation need to be adapted to ensure that you are understood. In some cases, it might be necessary to translate materials or invite an interpreter to the presentation. Other times, such as when communicating with young children, simply adjusting your vocabulary might suffice.

Honor flexibility in people's self-identification.

We may make assumptions about people's cultural identity while they may have an entirely different perception of themselves. Listen for information about self-perception. For example, do they consider themselves as having a spouse or a life partner? People may identify with a particular aspect of their diversity at different times (e.g., being a lesbian may be very salient in some circumstances but not in others).

TIP

People often consider eye contact as a sign of honesty and interest in the conversation, but some cultures view direct eye contact as a sign of disrespect or as being intrusive.

CONSIDER THIS: ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY CAN HELP YOU COMMUNICATE.

- Religious beliefs and spirituality play a significant role in many communities. The opinions of religious and other spiritual leaders may be important to those with whom you work and may have an impact on their receptivity to psychological information. Find out if inviting faith-based leaders to partner with you is a welcome strategy. Encourage and support the natural healing mechanisms that have sustained communities for generations.

- Culture can influence way individuals express their emotions. To best communicate with people in any community it is important to be open to differences in how people express their feelings.

- Ask community leaders to help you understand differences and identify effective ways to communicate and provide support. For example, individuals in some cultures may be uncomfortable with any type of confrontation and, as a result, may go along with an idea you present when in reality they do not support it. Also, remember that traditions and customs for grieving may look very different across cultures.

- Some cultures mistrust civil institutions such as police and law enforcement, health care systems, disaster relief, mental health agencies, and others because of past experiences. This can present unique challenges, especially in disaster situations, that may need to be addressed. Consider partnering with individuals who are perceived as community leaders, natural helpers, or organizations that the community trusts. Gaining their support can increase your credibility and help you deliver services more effectively. Learn about the culturally appropriate ways to engage community members (e.g., speaking to elders, offering gifts, sharing food). Make sure you know who can authorize your presence in the community.

WHAT IS ...

Culture?
The belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices and social institutions, including psychological processes. All individuals are cultural beings and have a cultural, ethnic, and racial heritage.

Race?
The category to which others assign individuals on the basis of physical characteristics, such as skin color or hair type. These characteristics can be the basis of generalizations and stereotypes.

Ethnicity?
The acceptance of the group mores and practices of one's culture of origin and the concomitant sense of belonging.

Multiculturalism and Diversity?
Terms that have been used interchangeably to include aspects of identity stemming from gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, or age.

Multiculturalism?
A broad scope of dimensions of race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, class status, education, religious/spiritual orientation, and other cultural dimensions, which are critical aspects of an individual's identity.

Diversity?
An individual's social identity including age, sexual orientation, physical disability, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, workplace role/position, religious/spiritual orientation, and work/family concerns.
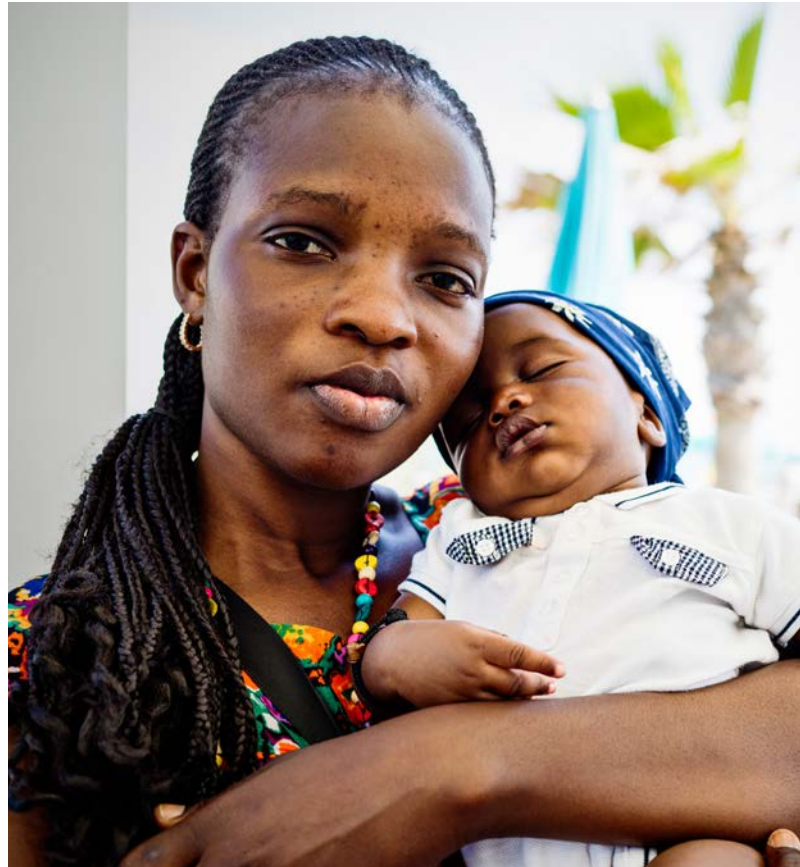
American Psychological Association, 2002. *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists.*

RESOURCES

More information is available through several offices within the American Psychological Association (APA; *apa.org*), including the Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns; and Disability Issues in Psychology.

The following is a sampling of the many available resources and references:

Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, National Center for Cultural Competence, *https://nccc.georgetown.edu*

National Multicultural Institute, *www.nmci.org*

Association of Black Psychologists, *www.abpsi.org*

National Latina/o Psychological Association, *www.nlpa.ws*

Asian American Psychological Association, *www.aapaonline.org*

Society of Indian Psychologists, *www.aiansip.org*

APA Ethics Code, *www.apa.org/ethics*

APA's Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs, Valuing Diversity Project, *www.apa.org/pi/valuing-diversity/default.aspx*

Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice and Organizational Change for Psychologists, *www.apa.org/about/policy/multicultural-guidelines.aspx*

Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients, *http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/guidelines.aspx*

Therapeutic Cultural Competence in Theory and Practice Following Hurricane Katrina: Culturally Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Disaster Relief, a presentation at the 115th Convention of APA.

Posttraumatic Silencing in Ethnic Minority Survivors of Disaster, Francis R. Abeug, PhD, Kaiser Psychiatry Inservice, June 28, 2007.

Multicultural Training: Implications for Disaster Assistance, Beth Boyd, PhD, Disaster Mental Health Institute, August 2007.

APA Disaster Response Network, 2007 Convention Symposium.

APA Monitor on Psychology, "Relief for All," October 2007, *http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct07/relief.aspx*

Enhancing Your Interaction with People with Disabilities, *http://www.apa.org/pi/disability/resources/publications/enhancing.aspx*

Boyd, B. & Gunsolley, H. (2017). Disaster survivors: Counseling implications. In J. Ponterotto, M. Casas, L. Suzuki & C. Alexander (Eds.). *Handbook of multicultural counseling, 4th ed.* Sage Publications.

Cook, J.M. & Elmore, D.L. (in press). Disaster Mental Health in Older Adults: Symptoms, Policy and Planning. In Neria, Y., Galea, S., & Norris, F. (Eds.). The mental health consequences of disasters. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Elmore, D.L. & Brown, L.M. (2008). Disaster Preparedness, Planning and Response for Older Adults: Implications for Public Policy. Generations, 31 (4), 66-74.

Ethnogeriatric Educational Resources, *https://web.stanford.edu/group/ethnoger*

Fostering Resilience in Response to Terrorism: For Psychologists Working with Older Adults *http://www.apa.org/pi/aging/resources/older-adults.pdf* by Antonette Zeiss and Joan Cook. Although titled as terrorism, they draw upon the trauma research.

Geriatric Education Center, Stanford University, Curriculum in Ethnogeriatrics, *http://sgec.stanford.edu*

Hinrichsen, G.A. (2006). Why multicultural issues matter to practitioners working with older adults. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 37(1), 29-35.