



American Indian/Alaska Native Cultural Competencies for Health Care Workers

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

- Know how your own ideas/attitudes/beliefs shape your perceptions, as well as what is factual.
- Know how American Indian/Alaskan Natives live today, not just the past.
- Know the differences among and between tribes, between traditional and non-traditional, and between urban and rural belief systems, culture, and life.
- American Indian/Alaskan Natives view health as more than just medical. A holistic approach of both spirit and body should be used.
- It is ok to admit limited knowledge of their culture and invite people to educate you about specific cultural intricacies of their community.
- American Indian/Alaskan Natives value the person over their skill/trade/occupation and expect you to do the same.
- Veterans are given special respect similar to that of elders for having accepted the role of protector and experienced personal sacrifice.
- Bartering may be a part of some tribal cultures. Understanding this is essential when discussing payment.
- In a group, it is important to allow time for all members to participate as the elders will likely allow everyone else to go first. Listen, and be patient for responses.
- Just because all community members live on the same reservation, doesn't mean they are of the same tribe, band, heritage, or cultural group.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

- Be sensitive to the value placed upon the community.
- Be cognizant of stereotypes.
- Sharing food is a way of welcoming visitors. If someone offers you food, it is a sign of respect to accept it.
- Humor may convey truths or difficult messages. Laughter may be used as medicine and a way to cope. Listen closely to humor as it may be seen as invasive to ask for too much direct clarification about sensitive topics.
- Teasing may be used to show affection or offer corrective advice. Don't take things personally.
- Learn by watching. Non-verbal gestures may be used. Careful observation is necessary to avoid misinterpretation.
- Unless you live as a traditional American Indian/Alaskan Native, do not disclose heritage/lineage unless asked.
- Do not be offended if someone has spiritual, religious beliefs, or practices that are different than yours and includes you in their own.
- American Indian/Alaskan Native people may look down to show respect.
- A gentle handshake is seen as a sign of respect, not weakness.
- Explain what you are writing when making clinical documentation and charting in the presence of the individual.

WHEN COMMUNICATING

- Be quiet and listen.
- Be present and attentive.
- Do not rush. Avoid frequently looking at your watch.
- Allow the person to finish speaking without interruption.
- No small talk.
- Do not force eye contact.
- Storytelling may be used to communicate.
- Avoid medical jargon.
- Explain your part in the process.
- Using a talk circle, where each person speaks individually, may be useful in a group setting.
- Historic rivalries, family or clan conflicts, and "Tribal Politics" may present challenges. Be wary of speaking about other tribes or people.

COMMON BIASES

- Fire water myth – associates arbitrary genetic factors that American Indian/Alaskan Natives crave alcohol, when in truth, alcohol rates are no different than other ethnic groups when considering socioeconomic level.
- Mystical spirituality – creating broad generalizations that American Indian/Alaskan Natives have mystical spirituality is just as damaging as negative stereotypes. Spirituality and world views are diverse among individuals, Tribes, and regions of the country.

*The AI/AN Cultural Competencies for Healthcare Workers was shared with members of Idaho's Indian Education Committee by Idaho State University representative (Vice Provost Selena Grace). Representatives of Idaho's five federally recognized tribes were asked to share feedback and input on the document for broader use and distribution.