

Culturally Responsive Communication Guide

Cultural Humility & Responsive Service Delivery • THW Continuing Education

REFERENCE

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A printable quick reference for practical communication skills. Use as a self-check or in supervision conversations.

Core Principles

Principle	Practice
RESPECT	Honor each person's cultural background, beliefs, and practices
CURIOSITY	Ask questions with genuine interest; be willing to learn
HUMILITY	Acknowledge what you don't know; avoid assumptions

Respectful Inquiry Techniques

Avoid	Try Instead
"Where are you really from?"	"Tell me about your background, if you'd like to share."
"Your people believe in..."	"What beliefs or practices are important to you?"
"In your culture, do you...?"	"What does this look like in your life?"
"Do you speak English?"	"What language are you most comfortable in?"
"What's your real name?"	"What name would you like me to use?"

Adapting Communication Styles

Dimension	Cultural Variations	Adaptive Response
Eye Contact	Direct vs. indirect; may indicate respect differently	Follow the person's lead; don't interpret avoidance as disengagement
Personal Space	Some prefer closeness, others more distance	Observe comfort level; adjust your positioning accordingly
Silence	May indicate respect, disagreement, or processing	Allow silence; don't rush to fill it

Emotional Expression	Some cultures more expressive; others more reserved	Don't equate reserve with disengagement
Time	Linear vs. flexible orientations to time	Be patient; don't interpret different time-keeping as disrespect

Working with Interpreters

- **Brief interpreter beforehand** on topics and terminology
- **Speak directly to the person**, not the interpreter
- **Use short sentences**, pause for interpretation
- **Avoid jargon, idioms, and slang**
- **Don't use family members** as interpreters when avoidable, especially children
- **Debrief with interpreter afterward** if needed

If You Commit a Microaggression

- Acknowledge: "I realize what I said may have been hurtful."
- Apologize sincerely: "I'm sorry."
- Avoid defending intent: "I didn't mean it that way" is not the most useful first response
- Listen: let the person tell you what they need, if they choose to
- Commit to do better; reflect on what to do differently
- Don't make the person manage your guilt

If You Witness a Microaggression

- Interrupt if appropriate: "I don't think that's quite accurate"
- Support the person targeted — check in afterward
- Educate the speaker privately when possible
- Don't expect the targeted person to lead the response