



Tips for Competently Engaging Culturally Diverse Communities

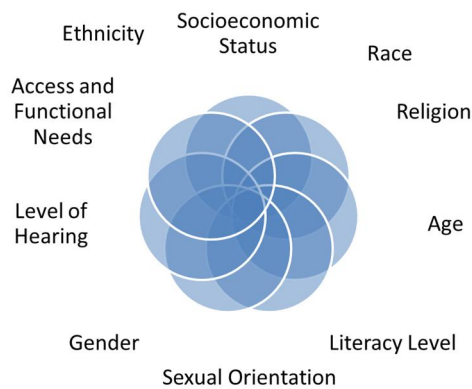
Cultural competence is the level of knowledge-based skills of individuals or organizations required to provide effective engagement and disaster human services to impacted individuals of a particular cultural group (e.g., racial or ethnic).

Adapted from the Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Not only race & ethnicity — groups of people share many attributes, so culture can be defined in many ways.

- ◆ Involves shared customs, values, social rules of behavior, rituals and traditions, and perceptions of human nature and natural events. Elements of culture are learned from others and may be passed down from generation to generation. (Source: SAMHSA)
◆ Broadly defined as a common heritage or learned set of beliefs norms, and values (Source: DHHS, 2001).
◆ People often identify with more than one culture.



Consider the potential cultural needs related to:

- ◆ National origin
◆ Time in US
◆ Generation
◆ Political beliefs
◆ Perceptions of family and community
◆ Perceptions of health, well-being, and disability
◆ Education level
◆ Geographic location
◆ Language
◆ Individual values and life experiences
◆ Any others can you think of?

Adapted from HHS Office of Minority Health Cultural Competency Curriculum

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

The knowledge, skills, attitudes, policies, and structures needed to offer support and care that is responsive and tailored to the needs of culturally diverse population groups (SAMHSA). Cultural competence is not about being politically correct; rather it is about customizing your engagement strategy to the needs of each group, meeting their needs in the way they want them met, and with the underlying mission of building trust and long-term, sustainable partnerships.

FIRST, LEARN THE BASICS OF THE GROUP(S) YOU ARE ENGAGING

- ◆ Refer to FEMA Tip Sheets for Engaging Religious Leaders.

WHAT IS SAID

- ◆ Use appropriate forms of address — refer to FEMA Tip Sheets for Engaging Religious Leaders.
◆ Many lay community leaders also have titles such as Doctor, Brother, Sister, or simply Mr./Ms.
◆ Ask others for their preferred name/title if unsure—better to err on the side of caution and start with formal titles.
◆ Some religious traditions have greetings used by members; these may be appreciated but not required for those outside.

WHO'S SAYING IT

- ◆ Dialects, words, and even regional accents have different meanings within one language. Using bilingual staff is not always sufficient as the same language does not equal the same culture (e.g. differing socioeconomic backgrounds).
◆ Involve locals and local leaders, recruiting "cultural brokers" (including civic, spiritual, or religious leaders, teachers, local officials, or long-term residents). Ensure not only representation but active involvement in decision making. Hire locally.
◆ Where possible, empower local leaders to speak for you, using a train-the-trainer approach.

WHERE IT'S SAID

- ◆ Choose meeting locations thoughtfully, considering neutral spaces and those that are ADA-accessible.
◆ Consider rotating meeting spaces to ensure fairness and avoiding any appearance of bias toward one group, including any cultural factor, especially religion, neighborhood, or socioeconomic group.
◆ Know the special considerations for Tribal lands.

**HOW IT'S SAID**

- ◆ Use the best medium to reach your audience; not the easiest option for you. While some cultures place importance on written information, others rely heavily on social networks and find in-person communication to be more trustworthy.
- ◆ Use non-print medium (TV, radio, social media, in-person meetings) to reach those who may not be literate.
- ◆ Is your message linguistically relevant? Consider use of bilingual staff, an interpreter, and translated written material.
- ◆ When using an interpreter, there are special guidelines and considerations when working with survivors (see SAMHSA).
- ◆ Provide captioning or sign language interpreters for deaf and hard of hearing survivors—see FEMA ODIC for guidelines.
- ◆ Ensure the way of delivering your message is age-appropriate. Children have unique needs in disaster and may appreciate activities or games. Older generations may prefer verbal conversations over written documentation.
- ◆ Be cognizant of socioeconomic levels—comfort levels with receiving aid and experience with filing paperwork will vary.
- ◆ Pay attention to your own nonverbal communication and those of others including eye contact and body language. While direct eye contact is valued in the U.S.; in some cultures it is common to look down or avoid direct eye contact.
- ◆ What is verbalized or not verbalized varies by culture and affects which feelings are OK and which are expressed.

**CLOTHING, JEWELRY, AND HEADDRESS**

- ◆ Wear modest clothing when entering houses of worship. Generally, this means clothing that covers shoulders, knees, and elbows. FEMA short-sleeve polo shirts and shorts would not be appropriate for some houses of worship.
- ◆ Shoes should be removed when entering homes and houses of worship of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs.
- ◆ Men should offer to cover their head when entering homes and houses of worship of Jews and Sikhs. Remove head covering when entering most Christian houses of worship.
- ◆ Some items of jewelry such as bracelets, necklaces, or beads worn by both males and females may have religious significance and should not be touched or removed without the wearer's permission.

**FOOD**

- ◆ If hosting a meeting where food is provided, ensure kosher, halal, and vegetarian options are available as appropriate. Ideally a hand-washing station should also be provided (see Hygiene and Washing Practices section).
- ◆ Kosher food needs to be offered from a separate serving area using separate utensils. Do not bring non-Kosher food into a synagogue, non-vegetarian food into a Gurdwara/Buddhist temple/Hindu temple, or non-Halal food into a mosque.

**GENDER, PHYSICAL INTERACTION, AND PERSONAL SPACE**

- ◆ Touch can be seen as a friendly gesture or as invasive.
- ◆ Cultural norms may mean someone moves closer to you or further away.
- ◆ Avoid initiating physical contact when meeting or greeting those from cultural traditions that differ from your own, especially those of the opposite gender. Initiating gestures common in the U.S. such as shaking hands or hugging/embracing may not be welcomed or met with the expected reaction.
- ◆ Be prepared with an alternate gesture, such as placing the right hand on one's own heart when being introduced.
- ◆ When in doubt, ask before making assumptions, wait for a leader to initiate or ask first!

**MEETING LOGISTICS, SCHEDULING, AND TIMEFRAMES**

- ◆ Different cultures view time intervals and time durations differently, and perceptions can be altered during a disaster.
- ◆ Timeframes set by responders are not always meaningful or realistic for survivors.
- ◆ Remember many community & religious leaders are bi-vocational. Avoid meeting scheduling during the daytime when possible or rotate meeting schedules. Respect Sabbath days and religious holy days.
- ◆ Most religious groups are open to interreligious/interfaith/multi-faith dialogue. However it is always important to ask about who they would partner with, as some groups are interested in limiting activities to their members.

**ANIMALS**

- ◆ Some groups including many individuals in the Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities prefer not to come into contact with dogs.
- ◆ Reasons vary due to religious restrictions, reasons of historic violence, and/or cleanliness.

**HYGIENE AND WASHING PRACTICES**

- ◆ Each culture has its own practices about manner and frequency hygiene and bathing.
- ◆ Many religions including Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism have specific requirements around ritual hand washing as it relates to prayer and/or daily life.
- ◆ In Hinduism and Islam the left hand is considered “unclean” and it is culturally competent to use only the right hand when eating, offering/receiving something, or shaking hands.

**VIEWS OF RELIGION/GOD IN DISASTER**

- ◆ Survivors' views of religion in disaster vary widely—avoid ascribing cause/effect of disaster to religion or referring to God.
- ◆ Avoid making assumptions of religious adherence based on dress/appearance.
- ◆ Some non-religious individuals may not understand/appreciate accommodations made for religious individuals.

**MORE RESOURCES**

***Developing Cultural Competence in Disaster Mental Health Programs: Guiding Principles and Recommendations***

<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Developing-Cultural-Competence-in-Disaster-Mental-Health-Programs/SMA03-3828>.

***Cultural Competency Curriculum for Disaster Preparedness and Crisis Response***

Free online training—provided by DHHS Office of Minority Health <https://cccdpcr.thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov>.