Principles for Culturally Competent Health Care for Asian-American Families and Communities

The most basic aspect of cultural competence relates to the provision of linguistically and culturally appropriate services, and lack of health care access for Asian-American groups is most commonly the result of language barriers. Yet cultural competence must do more than overcome language barriers; it must address cultural and societal barriers to receiving and accessing health services of all types. For example, the perception that Asian Americans are healthier and have less mental distress than the general population is a significant barrier to their access to health services.

Be sensitive to culturally appropriate behavior norms

Asian-American cultural norms, particularly among some Asian immigrant and refugee populations, may be quite different from US cultural norms. For example, looking straight into the eyes of some Asian elders may be equated with disrespect. A limp handshake—viewed negatively in the US context—may for your Asian American clients be a way of showing humility and respect. For many Asian-American groups, physical contact such as a handshake or a hug between a man and a woman may be interpreted as a sexual advance or overture. For some Asian subcultures, it may be appropriate for you, as a provider, to first address the oldest male in a group or family before greeting the other members.

Some Asian groups, especially those who have experienced torture, genocide, war, slavery, and political oppression, may show little emotion in their facial expressions. They may as a result of their life experiences be reluctant to express feelings, opinions, or desires openly. Be aware that a lack of facial expression or a low level of verbal communication may not indicate a lack of emotion or opinion. Neither does it indicate agreement with the diagnosis or recommended treatment. Try to ascertain your clients’ true feelings or opinions before accepting their apparent acquiescence at face value.

Seek out knowledgeable and accepted community resources

When seeking to enhance the cultural competence and cultural acceptance of the services you provide, engage community-based organizations or community leaders. Ask them about the health care and social service needs of their communities from their perspective. Enlist their aid in reviewing informational materials and identifying appropriate points of contact in the
community. Find out from them what you can do to make your services more acceptable for the Asian-Americans in your community and to make them easier for your Asian clients to access.

**Take a holistic approach to your clients’ health**

Many Asian American clients may be combining Western health care with traditional remedies. Seek information on the traditional healing methods your patient may be using in order to evaluate the potential adverse impact of combining Western and traditional medications. For example, Chinese healing arts include nutrition and dietary therapy, exercise, meditation, acupuncture, and herbal remedies. The goal of Chinese medicine is to preserve health and cure disease by recovering the balance within the human being and between the person and the surrounding environment. Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine may employ a wide variety of medicines and herbs in treating their clients. Some of these medicines and herbs may cause unwanted interactions with Western medicines. Educate yourself about traditional Asian approaches to healing, and encourage your clients and their healers to share their knowledge and experience with you. View yourself and your services as one of many appropriate sources of health for your Asian-American clients.

**Pay attention to non-verbal cues**

Some Southeast Asians may respond “yes” to a question as a way of being polite and avoiding conflict, even when they do not understand the question being asked. The unaware provider may misread this response and think that the client really means yes. Become acquainted with and aware of nonverbal cues such as body language when working with your Asian American clients. By increasing your skills in nonverbal communication, you may increase your ability to gather accurate information and, ultimately, improve your ability to meet your clients’ health needs.

**Avoid giving compliments**

Some Asian groups, especially recent immigrants, may feel uncomfortable about giving and receiving compliments such as “You look nice today” or “I love your hair style” or “Thank you very much for helping me.” They may also feel uncomfortable about saying “Thank you” or “You are welcome.” Their preferred response may instead be to mildly deny the compliment by saying something like, “Oh, it's a cheap old dress I bought a long time ago.” They may even ignore the compliment with silence, an awkward facial expression, or by turning their head away from the speaker. These social interactive behaviors do not signify a lack of appreciation for the compliment. Rather, this style of communication is based on a cultural tradition that emphasizes self-humility in social interactions.