

## TIP SHEET

# Respecting Cultural Differences in Communication Styles

By appreciating cultural differences, you can ensure that patients feel respected, that they are willing to follow medical instructions, and reduce their risk of misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup>

- **Eye Contact:** Cultures vary in whether eye contact is seen as polite or rude. Some patients may have difficulty making eye contact for non-cultural reasons as well. Do not assume a patient is rude or not listening if they are not making eye contact. If you are unsure if the patient is understanding, ask them to explain back to you in their own words what they heard you say.
- **Volume and Tone:** The appropriateness of volume and tone of speech can vary by culture. It can help to be aware of your own volume and tone to make sure the patient feels comfortable.
- **Emotional Expressiveness:** Cultures vary in whether expressing your emotions is encouraged or considered inappropriate. Ask open-ended questions to gauge how patients are feeling and work to build their trust over time.
- **Self-Disclosure:** In some cultures, it is more acceptable to share personal information than others, particularly with strangers. This can be especially common when discussing mental health. Be patient with patients who may take time to share.
- **Directness:** Some cultures appreciate direct communication and others prefer more subtlety and tact. When possible, tailor your level of communication approach to that of the patient, but always make sure to be clear and accurate in your speech.
- **Non-Verbal Cues:** In some cultures, words themselves convey the full meaning of what's being said. In other cultures, non-verbal cues, such as body language, are important to add meaning to the words that are being said. Pay attention to changes in non-verbal cues to get a sense of how the patient is feeling.

<sup>1</sup> <https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdfs/resource-library/communication-styles.pdf>