

HOLDING HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS

Provider tips to promote health and understanding in indigenous communities



DID YOU KNOW?

- Clinicians are often surprised to learn literacy is one of the strongest predictors of health status.
- Nearly 9 out of 10 adults have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available in our health care facilities.
- Health literacy is about communication and understanding!

INDIGENOUS WAYS OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

- Holistic
- Interconnected
- The land, mind, body and spirit cannot be separated.
- What is your health literacy knowledge about the patients you serve?
- Ask about traditional ways of healing, cultural beliefs and practices, experiential learning and lived experiences.
- Interrelated
- Interwoven



Prepare yourself.

Learn the history and culture and get involved in the community you serve. Meet tribal members and consider a tribal mentor. **Respect** local knowledge, traditions and experiences.

Review the patient's medical record before each visit to understand self-identity information, health literacy, previous assessment and history and learning style preference.



Begin the conversation.

Greet each person with a caring tone, using the person's name. Consider greeting in their native language, when applicable. **Sit down** to be at eye level whenever possible. **Recognize** nonverbal cues about eye contact. Some people may be uncomfortable with direct eye contact. Let the patient speak first and tell their story. Do not interrupt! Stories are foundational to being.

EDUCATING AND SHARING INFORMATION

- Use plain, common language and speak in a gentle voice.
- Show or draw pictures. For some, images are easier to remember.
- Use humor, storytelling and examples to promote trust, relatability and understanding.
- Limit the amount of information to key takeaway points and repeat these points at least twice.
- Explain the most important information first and last.
- Encourage notetaking and provide pen and paper. Ask the patient to take notes before and during their visit to improve recall.
- Use teach-back. Ask the patient to tell you in their words what they heard. If the patient cannot explain correctly, try another approach to ensure the patient's understanding.
- Encourage the patient to ask questions, e.g., "I know I've covered a lot of information. What concerns or questions do you have?"
- Promote discussion with open-ended questions and to check in with the patient emotionally, e.g., "How are you feeling about the information? It's ok to feel scared and overwhelmed."
- Include whomever is with the patient in the conversation. Ask the patient who they want included in medical decisions and give them time to process and consult with family, community and tribal members as desired.

Background and rationale from resources for healthy conversations

References

Culture Care Connection. Stratis Health. <https://stratishealth.org/initiative/culture-care-connection/>

- American Indians have a tradition of respect for elders. Many tribal communities have a custom of showing respect for elders by allowing them to speak first, without interruption, and giving time for opinions and thoughts to be expressed. It is disrespectful to openly argue or disagree with an elder.
- American Indians often have a concept of life and health that includes the full spectrum of life, including the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical dimensions. In this holistic view, life must be lived in balance to support individual and family health and wellness. Native elders may incorporate traditional healing practices into treatment or wellness practices.

Kalbfleisch, P. J. (2009). Effective health communication in native populations in North America. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 28(2), 158-173. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X08330607>

- Modern medical community members communicate by moving quickly to learn symptoms, make diagnoses and relay health information to assist as many patients as possible. Native Americans may not understand the response they receive from the modern medical community and may not trust or follow the recommended treatment.
- Effective communication for Native Americans living in North America and Hawaii includes taking time in conversation and providing information indirectly through storytelling, example and metaphor. It also includes listening and using humor to build relationships through communication.

La Cross Medical Health Sciences Consortium. (2016). Culture Clues™ adapted with permission from the University of Washington Medical Center.

https://www.lacrosseconsortium.org/uploads/content_files/files/American%20Indian.pdf

- Time and silence may be used to maintain harmony, be non-confrontational and prepare to listen to your patient. Listen for at least two minutes without saying a word. Let patients talk or let them be silent. Be aware it may take three or four encounters before trust and conversation emerges.

Martin, L. R., Haskard-Zolnierek, K. B., & DiMatteo, M. R. (2010). *Health behavior change and treatment adherence: Evidence-based guidelines for improving healthcare*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Waltman, J. (n.d.). [Working with Native American Patients & Clients - The 3 Cs \(mnpsych.org\)](http://mnpsych.org)

- Native participants in a study were unequivocal that non-Native providers get involved in the local community and learn as much as possible about the local tribes (or urban community). Native participants believed cultural competence is not something learned in school or by reading. Instead, they suggest providers should meet native people, find a native mentor and spend time in the community.
- Intake paperwork should be minimized before a face-to-face meeting.
- Ask the patient about their tribe and their understanding of their problem. Native patients report stronger therapeutic alliances when an interest is shown to understand their tribal identification, acculturation type and how culture plays a role in their lives.
- Native Americans commonly use humor to disguise trauma. Humor conversely provides strength to explore distress that may contribute to misdiagnosis and confusion for many non-Native health care providers.

To learn more about communicating with indigenous people, check out these additional health care communication resources from Indian Health Service (IHS) and the Partnership to Advance Tribal Health (PATH):

- [IHS Introduction to Health Literacy](#): Watch this online training for tribal and Urban Indian Health programs.
- [IHS Introduction to Health Literacy](#): IHS employees can complete this online training through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- [IHS White Paper on Health Literacy](#)
- [IHS Let's Talk](#)
- [IHS Health Care Communication](#)
- [IHS Health Literacy](#)
- [IHS Assessing Health Literacy](#)
- [IHS Teach Back](#)
- [IHS Plain Language](#)
- [PATH Health Literacy Resources](#)
- [PATH Let's TALK! Video](#)
- [PATH Let's TALK! Flyer](#)
- [PATH Let's TALK! Postcard](#)