Communicating With Young People from Different Cultural Backgrounds

The United States is a culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse country. Culture shapes people’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Young people may find it difficult to talk to an adult from a culture or community different from their own.

If you are assisting a young person with a cultural background different from your own, there can be additional challenges in communication. In some cultures, it is common to describe emotional distress using physical terms rather than emotional terms (e.g., complaints about stomach aches and headaches rather than anxiety or fearfulness). You may find it to be more effective to first establish a warm and trusting relationship with the young person’s family, discussing the strengths and interests of the young person, before sharing your concerns about the young person’s situation or condition. Gain knowledge of the local services that are effective with and acceptable to members of this person’s cultural group before recommending where the young person can go for help.

It is important to know about the different cultural and racial groups in your community and what makes these groups unique without generalizing. For example, when confronted with a mental health challenge, Chinese Americans generally use family and community resources first and mental health services as a last resort. In addition, each family will have different acculturation experiences within each generation that will influence their approach to mental health services. It may be more effective for you to first ask what the young person would want rather than jumping to the conclusion that they want a therapist. Sometimes, a young person will be more comfortable talking to an adult from their own culture than to someone from a different culture.

It is important, however, not to make assumptions about the young person’s needs solely on their cultural background. Ask questions about what the young person needs rather than acting on the basis of what you think they need. Ask questions about what has happened to the young person rather than what is wrong with them. Remember that it is more important to make the young person feel comfortable, respected, and cared for than to do all the right things and follow all the rules.

Cultural Safety

A culturally safe environment is “an environment, which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of who they are, and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening.”

Practicing cultural safety means

- Respecting the culture of the community by using appropriate language and behavior
- Never doing anything that causes the person to feel shame
- Supporting the person’s right to make decisions about seeking culturally based care

Cultural Competence

As noted earlier, there is great cultural diversity within the United States, especially among those under the age of 18. Moreover, everyone is a member of multiple cultural groups, based on race, ethnicity, faith, region of country, type of work, level of education, physical ability or disability status, sexual identity, and so forth. In many ways, every encounter is probably a cross-cultural encounter. Here are a few points to consider in these cross-cultural encounters.
Learn about the young person’s culture and concept of mental illness

For example, many Native American/Alaska Native people understand mental health within a broad context of health and well-being that includes concepts of social and emotional functioning. Symptoms of mental illness are understood as part of a person’s spirit or personality. If it seems that someone has a problem, they may be described as having a lack of harmony among the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional forces in their life.

Know what is acceptable, and what is not, in a young person’s culture

For some cultural groups, it is important to consider the spiritual context of their behaviors. Sometimes experiences such as seeing spirits or hearing voices of deceased loved ones are embedded in the culture and are misdiagnosed or mislabeled as mental illness. It would not be surprising for someone from a spiritually oriented cultural group such as Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, or Hispanic to exhibit this behavior and belief. Also, every family or household has a unique family culture. For example, some families have family secrets, and the family’s practice may be to never talk about an uncle’s past sexual abuse conviction because of shame.

Know what is culturally appropriate communication

When talking to a young person outside your own culture or community, you may need to adjust your usual communication style. The young person may be used to a different level of eye contact or physical space. For example, in some communities, eye contact can be a way to reprimand rather than respect someone, and it could contribute to the young person feeling judged. Similarly, there may be issues of age and gender that get in the way of effective communication. For example, it may not be appropriate in the young person’s culture to speak alone with an adult of the opposite sex.

Do not shame the young person, their family, or community

The concept of shame is important in many cultural communities and can be a barrier to seeking help. Failure to practice cultural safety can contribute to the experience of shame. Be aware of the language and behaviors that can trigger the experience of shame in the young person’s community. The youth and families of these cultural communities may be reluctant to share their circumstances out of shame.

Use community and family supports

It is important for a first aider to know about both the formal and informal services and supports in a community. Informal supports may be particularly important if access to professional support or mental health services is limited. Encourage the young person to build a social network of personal relationships with people they can trust, respect, and turn to for support or assistance. This person could be a family member, a respected elder of a tribal community, a community liaison, or the neighborhood grandmother.

Be mindful of young people who are immigrants and refugees

Some young people who move to the United States from abroad will be glad to have arrived in this country and will adjust relatively quickly and easily. Others will find the move to the United States difficult because of attachment to their country of origin, loss of family and friends, or difficulties in adjustment. A young person who has come to the United States may have experienced trauma in their country of
origin, perhaps because of war, poverty, oppressive
government, or separation from a family member who
moved to the United States to prepare for the arrival
of the rest of the family. Young people in immigrant
or refugee families may also experience the same
barriers as other cultural groups:

- **Racism and discrimination** that may inhibit
  a young person from interacting with people
  from outside their cultural group

- **Language difficulties and inadequate
  support** for language access to services

- **Lack of awareness and understanding** of the
  United States’ health system

- **High degree of stigma about mental illnesses**
  in their own culture or country of origin

- **Lack of access to formal services and supports**
  because of being in the country without legal
  documentation

- **Lack of knowledge about mental health**
  challenges and disorders

Many communities have agencies that provide
services for specific cultural and ethnic populations.
If you live or work in a community with a large migrant
or refugee population, it is useful to know about any
culturally appropriate services available, particularly
those that are tailored to the needs of young people.

**Be aware of the possibility of a history of abuse or neglect**

Abuse, whether sexual, physical, verbal, or emotional
as well as all types of neglect, is a significant risk
factor for developing mental health challenges and
disorders (See First Aid for Children and Youth Affected
by Traumatic Events and First Aid for Young Adults and
Adults Affected by Traumatic Events).

When a young person has been betrayed by an adult
in this way, a number of problems are created. The
youth may have tried to talk to other adults and been
disbelieved, dismissed, or promised help that they
never received. Some young people might be entirely
disengaged and distrustful of adults and refuse to
talk. Others will seek attachment and affection from
every adult they meet, resulting in inappropriate
physical intimacy, which can be difficult to cope with.

If you are assisting a young person with this kind
of history, be predictable and consistent in your
interactions. You need to be firm about what your role
as a first aider is and the limitations of your role. If you
are going to need to refer the youth to other services,
be honest and upfront about this. Show the young
person that

- You believe what they have told you about the
  way they are feeling and experienced.

- What they are sharing is important to you, and
  you want to help.

- There are adults who can be trusted.

- There are ways to feel and be safe.

If you are helping a young person who discloses that
they are being abused and this abuse is not known to
any child protection agency, there are steps you need
to take to report it. Depending on where you live and
what your job is, you may have mandatory reporting
responsibilities. In any case, you need to know whom
to tell. It may be a government agency or the police.
For state guidelines on mandatory reporting, see
Appendix 1: Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and
Neglect: Summary of State Laws.