

# Cultural Impacts on Working and Communicating with a Consumer

It is important to understand cultural differences in order to provide the best care to the consumer regardless of race, origin, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, social class, economic situation, and/or disability.

Culture is one of a number of influences on behaviors in the face of illness and other life transitions, and it is important to take these factors into account when interacting with your consumer. You cannot assume that your past experiences with a person from a particular culture can be applied to everyone from that culture. It is important to seek more information by asking your consumer questions about his/her culture and how this may impact your work as a provider.

Your own ethnicity, religion, and where you grew up can change how you perceive the world, affect the way you perceive “appropriate” behavior, and influence your treatment of the consumer and the authorized tasks.

## **Common differences between cultures which may impact your work:**

- **Native language**
  - You may have a different native language than the consumer. In these circumstances, it is natural that communication may be difficult and require patience. Once you learn to listen to each other and adjust to differences in language, it will get easier.
- **Personal space**
  - There are many different comfort levels. In some cultures, standing close is comfortable, while in others giving ample space is important for personal comfort.
- **Touch**
  - Different parts of the body are taboo in different cultures such as touching the head and feet. In addition, it is important to be conscientious about gender differences in comfort with touch. In some cultures, there is great sensitivity regarding opposite gender caregivers.

- **Time-orientation**
  - Differences include being strictly oriented to clock time versus embracing personal and subjective time. The importance of being “on time” can vary.
- **Gestures**
  - There are a number of gestures commonly used in the United States that may have a different meaning or be offensive to those from other cultures. One example is the use of a finger or hand to indicate “come here please.” Pointing with one finger is also considered rude in some cultures.

**Good communication** is the first step to a positive working relationship. It is important to discuss with your consumer the topics above. People from different cultures may have different expectations and different ways of communicating. It is important to take some time to understand how your consumer communicates and ask questions if you are unsure or confused.

**Here are some common differences in communication between cultures that you may encounter:**

- **Conversational style and pacing**
  - Silence is interpreted differently by different cultures. In some, it is a sign of respect, while in others a person will find you rude or even interpret silence as a “no” response.
  - Styles of questions and answers can be different in cultures ranging from blunt and to the point to indirect and storytelling styles.
  - In some cultures, directness, insistence, and emphasis can look like anger to others. For example, consider the difference between “Close the window!” and “Could you please close the window?”
- **Eye contact**
  - In mainstream Western culture, eye contact is interpreted as attentiveness and honesty. However, in some cultures, eye contact is thought to be disrespectful or rude, and lack of eye contact does not mean a person is not paying attention. Avoiding eye contact has many reasons and can be easily misinterpreted.

Understanding and respecting that there may be differences between you and the consumer will help in maintaining a positive relationship and providing the consumer with the best possible care.