Communication styles

The table below outlines different aspects of communication styles and how they tend to vary across cultures. Being aware of how communication styles tend to vary across cultures can help you avoid misunderstandings, but it is also important that you understand the unique cultural identity and individual preferences of those you serve in order to communicate with them effectively.

COMMUNICATION STYLE	CULTURAL DIFFERENCES	EXAMPLES
Tone, volume, and speed of speech	Culture can influence how loudly it is appropriate to talk, the tone and level of expressiveness in the voice, and the speed of speech. Loud, fast, and expressive speech is common in some cultures but could be considered rude or aggressive in others.	Loud and expressive speech is often more common in African American, Caribbean, Latino, an Arab cultures. Some American Indian cultures, Alaskan native, and Latin American indigenous cultures favor softer tones of voice and less expressive speech, as do some East Asian cultures.
Eye contact	Culture can influence whether it is considered polite or rude to make eye contact when addressing someone, and whether eye contact is necessary to indicate that one is listening.	Direct eye contact is highly valued, both when speaking and listening, by many white Americans. Direct eye contact can be considered rude in some Asian cultures.
Use of pauses and silence	Culture can influence whether pauses and silence are comfortable or uncomfortable.	Pauses and silence are uncomfortable for many people who identify with dominant U.S. cultural norms. Some American Indian cultures value silences and pauses as they provide time to process information and gather thoughts.
Facial expressiveness	Culture can influence whether low facial expressiveness is considered normal or interpreted as a lack of understanding, a lack of interest, or even resistance.	Many of the cultures that exhibit high verbal expressiveness also exhibit high facial expressiveness (for example, many cultures from Latin American and the Caribbean). Maintaining a neutral facial expression is more common among

COMMUNICATION STYLE	CULTURAL DIFFERENCES	EXAMPLES
		some American Indian and Asian cultures.
Emotional expressiveness	Culture can influence how open people are in talking about their feelings. It's important to note that people from cultures that tend to be more emotionally expressive may still think that it is inappropriate to discuss emotions (particularly negative emotions) with people who are not close friends or family.	People from Western European cultures and white Americans are often relatively comfortable expressing that they "feel sad." In some other cultures, people may feel more comfortable showing different emotions, such as anger. In some cultures (for example, some East Asian cultures), expressing any strong emotions could be considered inappropriate.
Self-disclosure	Culture can influence whether talking to others about difficult personal situations is accepted or considered inappropriate. Individuals from cultures where self-disclosure is generally viewed negatively may disclose little about themselves and feel uncomfortable when asked to open up about personal problems.	Self-disclosure may be particularly low for people from highly collectivist cultures (such as many East Asian cultures), especially if they believe it can bring shame on the family to admit to having a mental illness or substance use disorder. However, it's important to note that level of trust with the officer also influences the degree of a community member's disclosure, meaning self-disclosure can be low for someone of any cultural group if there is not sufficient trust and rapport.

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Formality	Culture can influence whether personal warmth or respect and formality are more valued.	Many Latinos, Blacks, and Whites may prefer a personal and warm style. Community members from these cultures may expect to make small talk and ask questions to get to know those who are providing them with disaster or emergency assistance. Other cultural groups (for example, some East Asian cultures) may expect a relationship with a disaster or emergency responder to be formal, particularly at the beginning.
Directness	Culture can influence whether verbal directness is valued or considered rude.	The cultural norm in the U.S. is to be relatively direct compared to many other cultures. In many cultures (for example, many Asian cultures and Latin American cultures), certain things, particularly those that are negative or embarrassing, should not be said directly but treated with subtlety.
Context	Culture can influence whether communication is high or low context. In low context cultures, words convey most of the meaning. In high context cultures, meaning is conveyed by more subtle verbal and non-verbal cues.	The communication culture in the U.S. is mostly low context (i.e., words carry most of the meaning), whereas many other cultural groups are higher context. With community members from higher context cultures, it's important to pay attention to non-verbal and situational cues, not just the actual words said. Some messages may be "coded" and not intended to be taken at face value.

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Orientation to self or others	Some cultures are much more oriented to the self, while others are more oriented to others. This shows in communication styles through the use of mostly "I" statements versus use of primarily third person and plural pronouns.	The cultural norm in the U.S. is individualistic (self-oriented). Many other cultural groups are more collectivistic (i.e., other-oriented). Members of these groups may speak in third person and use plural pronouns rather than "I" statements. Community members who are more other-oriented may prefer to involve their families and communities in therapy. However, this is not always the case, as stigma and shame can also be particular issues for community members from collectivistic cultures.

Sources:

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