

Cultural Competency – Working with the Hmong

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The following are general guidelines prepared by Lutheran Social Service, Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc., and RISE/Catholic Charities.

It is important to keep in mind that Hmong lifestyles are changing and not all Hmong are the same. Some Hmong were born in the U.S. and more and more Hmong are college educated. There are religious differences and varying degrees of acculturation within the Hmong community. Just as individual Americans have many different styles and preferences, so do Hmong. An approach that works beautifully with one Hmong person may not work at all with another.

Keep tips in mind, but be flexible and creative with Hmong as you are with others. Some of this information assumes limited English proficiency.

Getting Your Point Across

- Explain everything very clearly at the beginning; don't assume.
- Decide what is the main point to communicate.
- Think through the proper sequence of an explanation.
- Experiment to see whether or not the listener understands better if you use a chart, visuals, or a brief written explanation.
- Simplify the explanation: use a minimum of well chosen words, but not broken English.
- Be aware of information overload.
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues that signal a lack of understanding: e.g. glazed eyes, looking off to side, shifting uncomfortably, giggling.
- Ask the person to repeat what you said, in order to confirm understanding.
- Use consistent terminology.
- Speak clearly, but not more loudly than normal.
- Emphasize key words. Avoid slang.
- Do not say or suggest something will happen unless it will - otherwise it may be considered deceptive.
- Do not raise your voice or speak forcefully - it could break the relationship or even give the Hmong individual the mistaken idea that he or she has been fired.
- Be aware that many Hmong understand English better than they speak it.

The Word "Yes"

- Yes does not always mean Yes. Yes often means: Yes, I heard you and respect that you asked a question, not Yes to the content of the question. No is considered disrespectful, so Hmong often convey a No answer by saying Yes. For example: Q: "Are you going to do it?" A: "Yes, I don't do it." The answer means that the person is not going to do it.
- Yes answers must always be tested. Reframe the questions and give the person a way to answer without having to say No.
- Avoid questions that are answered with a simple yes or no.

Understanding The Hmong Point of View

- Some Hmong people are reluctant to ask questions because they believe it shows disrespect and might make the speaker angry. Specifically, they expect that it is the speaker's responsibility to explain completely and perfectly. Thus, the need to ask questions implies that the speaker did a poor job of explaining.
- Some may prefer to see and experience something rather than just being told about it.

- Some may want to try something before asserting: "I can do it."
- Some may prefer being trained in a skill before being asked to perform it independently.
- Some may prefer to learn a new task in a group.
- Touching can have unanticipated meanings. Touching between members of the same sex is common, expressing ordinary friendship. Touching between members of the opposite sex — even just as a friendly gesture — is considered disrespectful. Some are sensitive/suspicious about friendly overtures from someone of the opposite sex, even when the overture is totally innocent.
- Most respect firmness and politeness.

Interviewing Hmong People

- Some Hmong individuals will be shy at an interview, and even those with excellent English may not be comfortable talking and may seem tongue-tied.
- Some may be more reserved, and look away to show respect.
- Open-ended questions, such as "What are your strengths?" are difficult for some. Talking about yourself is often considered rude.
- Ask specific questions to prompt a response.
- Women may not be used to shaking hands as a greeting.

In the Workplace

- Tell new Hmong employees to call in when they are sick. In some countries, employees simply take the time off and tell their employer when they return to work.
- Explain payroll deductions to new employees before they receive their first paycheck. Otherwise, they may believe that they were paid less than they were promised.
- Spend a little extra time at the beginning to explain benefits and policies.
- In some Hmong countries the boss has the right to beat the employee. Thus, it is very threatening to say or do anything that might make the boss angry.
- Consider appointing an established employee to act as mentor/ombudsman.
- Consider hiring more than one person from an ethnic group.
- Do not stereotype what jobs people can do based on what they did in their home countries.
- When bringing new people into the work environment, change will be mutual. The greater burden of change lies with the newcomer, but all must be willing to look at how things are done.
- There are different expectations about how time at work is spent. A Hmong person may be apt to skip coffee breaks in order to demonstrate desire to work hard, not knowing that this may make co-workers uncomfortable. A Hmong person may not initially exhibit much initiative in seeking out the next task to do. The supervisor is expected to assign tasks.

Other Tips

- If you experience difficulty with a Hmong person, bring in a mediator. He or she may be angry or worried about something that you are not aware of.
- Behavior does not necessarily mean what Americans think it does. It may have an unexpected cultural basis.
- The reason a Hmong person gives for an action or behavior may not be the real reason. This is not lying. It is an effort to avoid saying something disrespectful or negative, to avoid conflict. You may have to talk a little about what is going on to get at the issue. This takes more time, but is much more effective.
- The Hmong consider looking someone in the eye to be rude or bold. Most have been told that in America it is proper to look directly at others, but it is still difficult for some until they have had opportunities to practice.
- Encourage and complement, but don't use empty flattery.
- Correct privately, not publicly.
- When correction is necessary, first refer to the positive part of the person's performance. Then ask for the specific change or improvement needed.
- Some Hmong are apt to smile when reprimanded or in a difficult situation. This expresses sadness, embarrassment, or insecurity.
- Hmong view staff as a family rather than a team, and expect the supervisor to function authoritatively.
- Test understanding of directions by performance, not by asking if someone understands the directions.
- There are significant cultural differences among different Hmong groups.

Don't let this list intimidate you. Every new immigrant group found its place in America with the help of employers willing to make a little extra up-front investment. Every new immigrant group has repaid those special employers with tremendous productivity. Our newest immigrants, eager to fit in, can be a rich labor resource for you.

Culturally Competent Health Care Tips

A general guideline to providing culturally competent health care. Tips were taken from *When Your Patient Is a Hmong Refugee*, a paper written by Betty Rairdan, RN, MN, ARNP; and Zana Rae Higgs, RN, EdD. This paper was published in the American Journal of Nursing, 1992: excerpted with permission.

- Physical privacy is important to the Hmong. Protect it by draping curtains, draping properly and not requiring the patient to undress more than necessary.
- The Hmong believe that the soul resides in the head. Only certain elders have the right to touch a person's head.
- Never touch the head of a Hmong adult without permission and do not pat children on the head.
- Do not remove jewelry or amulets without the permission and understanding of the patient, oldest male family member, or spiritual leader.
- Encourage and support a visit from the shaman if the patient so desires.
- When ill, the Hmong prefer plain foods and soups, and avoid spices, salt, and garlic.
- Offer warm or hot fluids to the Hmong woman who has just given birth. Encourage family members to bring their special foods in for the patient. Work with the dietitian to ensure that the woman receives food consistent with traditional dietary practices.
- Patients may prefer juices or tea instead of water. If the patient appears to be unwilling to drink water, offer to boil it.
- If the family wishes to bring an herbal drink to the patient, arrange for a portion of it to be sent for analysis to be sure that it doesn't contain any chemical that would react adversely with the medicine prescribed by the physician. Or ask an herbalist to develop a list of common herb treatments and their desired effect; then give the list to the hospital pharmacist for the staff's use in checking for potential drug interactions or untoward effects.
- During discharge planning or when working with outpatients, determine what herbal preparations the patient is using or expects to use at home.