

Communicating effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

This information sheet provides a general guide for communicating effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Further information for communicating in the clinical context can be found in the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Patient Care Guidelines](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/atsihealth/documents/patient_care_guideline.pdf).

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Demonstrating understanding

The negative impacts of racial and economic disadvantage and a series of past government policies, including segregation, displacement and separation of families has contributed to the mistrust held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards government services and systems.

In today's Western dominant society, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be a marginalised and socially disadvantaged minority group. Compared to other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience significantly varied outcomes related to health, education, employment and housing. Discrimination, racism and lack of cultural understanding mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still experience inequality and social injustice.

People's cultural beliefs, values and world-views influence thinking, behaviours and interactions with others. It is important to reflect without judgement before, during and after interacting with people whose beliefs, values, world-views and experiences are different to your own.

Personal communication

Rapport

In many traditional cultures, a high sense of value is placed on building and maintaining relationships. Taking a 'person before business' approach will help form this relationship and build rapport.

- Introduce yourself in a warm and friendly way.
- Ask where people are you from, share stories about yourself or find other topics of common interest.

Language

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not speak English as their first language. Some also speak English in different dialects such as Kriol, Aboriginal English and Torres Strait Creole.

Some general tips to overcome language barriers may include:

- Avoid using complex words and jargon.
- Explain why you need to ask any questions.
- Always check you understood the meaning of words the person has used and vice versa.
- Use diagrams, models, dvds and images to explain concepts, instructions and terms.
- Be cautious about using traditional languages or creole words unless you have excellent understanding.
- If required, seek help from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Time

In Western culture, emphasis is placed on time to meet deadlines and schedules. Time is perceived differently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, as more value is placed on family responsibilities and community relationships.

- Consider allocating flexible consultation times.
- Take the time to explain and do not rush the person.

Non-verbal communication

Some non-verbal communication cues (hand gestures, facial expressions etc.) used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have different meanings in the Western context. Be mindful that your own non-verbal communication will be observed and interpreted. For example, feelings of annoyance may be reflected by your body language and are likely to be noticed.

Personal space

Be conscious about the distance to which you are standing near a person. Standing too close to a person that you are unfamiliar with, or of the opposite gender, can make a person feel uncomfortable or threatened.

Touch

Always seek permission and explain to the person reasons why you need to touch them. Establish rapport first to make person feel comfortable.

Silence

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, extended periods of silence during conversations are considered the 'norm' and are valued. Silent pauses are used to listen, show respect or consensus. The positive use of silence should not be misinterpreted as lack of understanding, agreement or urgent concerns. Observe both the silence and body language to gauge when it is appropriate to start speaking. Be respectful and provide the person with adequate time. Seek clarification that what was asked or discussed was understood.

Eye contact

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, avoidance of eye contact is customarily a gesture of respect. In Western society averting gaze can be viewed as being dishonest, rude

or showing lack of interest. Some (but not all) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may therefore be uncomfortable with direct eye contact, especially if unfamiliar. To make direct eye contact can be viewed as being rude, disrespectful or even aggressive. To convey polite respect, the appropriate approach would be to avert or lower your eyes in conversation.

- Observe the other person's body language.
- Follow the other person's lead and modify eye contact accordingly.
- Avoid cross-gender eye contact unless the person initiates it and is comfortable.

Titles

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the terms 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' are used to show respect for someone older than you. This person does not have to be a blood relative or necessarily an Elder.

- Only address people with these titles if approval is given and/or a positive relationship exists.

Shame

'Shame' (deeply felt feelings of being ashamed or embarrassed) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may result from sharing private or personal information, cultural beliefs and from breaches of confidentiality.

- Take a discrete approach and avoid discussions in open or public spaces.
- Build trust and rapport to help people feel safe and comfortable with you and in their surroundings.
- Ensure confidentiality and consider Men's and Women's Business.

Listening

Explaining may take time because of narrative communication style or due to linguistic differences. The person may be struggling to communicate what they are trying to get across.

- Avoid selective hearing and ensure you are 'actively' listening.
- Paraphrase by summarising and repeating what the person said. This will help with clarification and signal you have been listening.
- Show empathy, be attentive and avoid continually interrupting or speaking over the person.

Questioning

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, indirect questioning is the approach most preferred. Direct questioning may lead to misunderstandings, discourage participation and make it difficult to obtain important information, particularly when a person is communicating in non-Standard English.

- Use indirect, 'round about' approaches (e.g. frame a question as a statement then allow time for the answer to be given).
- Clarify if the person understood the meanings of your words or questions and that you understood their answers.

- Avoid compound questions (e.g. "how often do you visit your GP and what are the reasons that you don't?").
- Use plain words (e.g. say 'start' rather than 'commence').
- Do not ask the person to continually repeat themselves
- Avoid using hypothetical examples.

'Yes'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a tendency to agree with the questions even when they do not understand or agree, and may answer questions the way they think others want. People may say "yes" to questions to end the conversation so they can leave, to deal with other priorities, or because they simply feel uncomfortable.

- Take the time to build rapport to make the person feel comfortable.
- Explain at the beginning how long the appointment will take and give the person the opportunity to ask questions.
- If a person repeatedly says 'yes' immediately after a question, ask with respect what they understood from the questions and/or to explain reasons for their decision.

Clear instructions

It is critical to provide clear and full explanations so that the person fully understands your instructions. For example, to simply say "take until finished" - this may be misunderstood as "take until you feel better" rather than "take until all the tablets are finished".

Provide options and ownership

When people are given choices and ownership over managing their health, the likelihood of medical compliance is increased.

- Provide options for care; for example, explain how some medications can be taken orally or by injection.
- Ensure that any options are practical and realistic.
- Do not make promises that you cannot deliver as this may create mistrust.

Making decisions

Due to family kinship structures and relationships, decision-making usually involves input by other family members.

- Check with the person if their decisions requires consultation with family.
- Allow time for information to be clearly understood .
- Be respectful if you are asked to leave the room or the meeting for matters to be discussed in private by the family.

Communication assistance and cultural support

Build relationships within the local community and learn suitable and generally accepted words. Your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff may be able to assist with cultural knowledge and interpreting information. They may also advise you of the best ways of distributing information through the community.