

## **What Can You Do If You Have Made a Cultural Mistake?**

When you are interacting with someone from a culture with which you are unfamiliar, you may feel that you are stepping into uncharted territory. It is unrealistic to expect that you will be completely culturally competent in these new situations. Trying to be perfect can only lead to your discomfort and you will probably act unnatural. Because you are in an unfamiliar situation, you can expect to make a cultural mistake.

Everyone, at one time or another, is bound to make a mistake and inadvertently cause someone discomfort. It is important to realize that we are all human, that mistakes are inevitable, and that most people do not genuinely set out to offend others. This information will help you minimize the risk of a cultural error and recover from your mistake once they occur:

- Acknowledge that the client/patient and family are the experts on their own cultural norms. Although you may have experience working with others from the same culture, each client/patient and family must be approached in a unique way. No person is a stereotype of their culture of origin; each person is a unique blend of the many dimensions of diversity that they possess; ethnic group, upbringing, life experiences, county of birth, socioeconomic circumstance, education, etc. There is also always vast diversity within a cultural group. Therefore, although you should be knowledgeable about the norms of a client/patient and family's cultural group, never assume an individual follows any or all norms of that group.
- Mirror or copy the behaviours of the patient/client and family member. Learn to adopt the social etiquette norms and verbal and nonverbal behaviours of the client/patient and family. Take cues about how to behave from the client/patient and family. If the client/patient and family address you in a formal way, you should address them in a formal way. If the client/patient and family speak softly, you should lower your volume of voice. Pattern your eye contact, use of space, and conversational pace to that of the client/patient and family
- Listen to the client/patient and family with openness. Avoid putting the client/patient and family in the position of feeling that they need to defend or explain their cultural practices. If the client/patient and family feel the need to put energy into defending their cultural practices, energy is diverted away from the issue at hand.
- Be alert to the client/patient and family's needs, preferences and expectations. If you are a health care provider/health professional you may need to consider modifying the care plan to address what is important to the client/patient and family before working on the priorities you have identified.
- If you are in the position of making recommendations to the client/patient and family, whenever possible try to explain the recommendations from their frame of reference instead of from your perspective.
- Be aware of facial expressions and body language of the client/patient and family at all times, particularly be aware of a change in the client/patient and family expression or tone that indicates that something is wrong. The client/patient and

family may be experiencing cultural pain. Cultural pain may result if you inadvertently ignore an important cultural obligation or violate a cultural taboo. The client/patient and family may be deeply offended and often embarrassed when they are experiencing **cultural pain** and may not know how to correct the situation gracefully. They may simply withdraw from you as a result. If you notice a change in the “atmosphere” of the situation, you should try to amend it by asking the client/patient or family if you have said or done something that has offended them.

**If you make a cultural error:**

1. Apologize and express regret about the behaviour or words that have offended the client/patient and family.

Offering a sincere apology when you have made a mistake is crucial in maintaining or preparing your relationship with the person you are communicating with. Often attempts to explain why you said what you did or to justify your error will lead to further problems.

2. Convey a desire to respect the client/patient and family’s cultural norms.

Let the client/patient and family know that the cultural error resulted from a lack of understanding or knowledge about their culture. Tell them that you would like to learn more so that you can show respect in the future.

3. Express a willingness to learn about the client/patient and family’s cultural needs.

Treat your mistake as a learning opportunity. Reflect on what you said and understand why the person was offended or uncomfortable. If you are completely unaware, ask the client/patient and family what you did and how you can correct it. Once you understand this, you will be less likely to repeat this mistake.

Review the information provided to you on this website. It will help reinforce your understanding of your mistake and help you not to repeat it.

It is often very helpful to talk about your mistake with others. This not only helps to increase your understanding of the mistake, but it helps others too, so that they do not make the same mistake.

4. Don’t repeat your mistake.

Make a conscious effort to not repeat your mistake. Think before you speak. Put into practice the information that is provided for you on this website. Be aware of the importance of listening, observing and following verbal and nonverbal cues.

5. Move on.

*Remember, all of us at some time or another has made a mistake and inadvertently offended someone or caused someone discomfort. Don’t beat yourself up over the mistake. Acknowledge that you made a mistake despite your best intentions and let it go.*