



Cultural security when working with Aboriginal people

Points to consider
and useful tips
for professionals



Communication

Prior to colonisation in Australia, there were more than 600 languages spoken by Aboriginal people. As a result of the impact of colonisation, only about half those languages remain.*

Still, there are many Aboriginal people who use English as a second, third or fourth language. Written language skills can be limited or non-existent.

Check for understanding and engage Aboriginal Interpreting WA (AIWA) with consent as needed.

It is important to be aware that the Aboriginal view can be different from western society, and understanding can be lost in communication.

Useful tips

- **Allow for periods of silence in meetings and general conversation.** Silence does not mean the individual doesn't understand, but rather they are listening and thinking. Ensure you provide space for silence.
- **Do not interrupt or speak over the person.** Wait your turn to speak. If the person is looking around the room they may still be listening to you. Give them time to reflect and respond.
- **Be conscious of personal space.** Being too close can make the people feel uncomfortable, threatened or overwhelmed.
- **Consider tone of voice.** Speak softly and use gentle body language. Slow down and be clear with your words.
- **Use everyday language and do not use jargon.** It may be necessary to take the time to talk people through the information.

Cultural considerations

Common practices


- **Men's and women's business** refers to cultural requirements and obligations specific to gender. Men are not permitted to involve themselves in women's business and women are not permitted to involve themselves in men's business. There are times when both genders can come together to maintain cultural service.
- **Sorry business** involves cultural obligations specific to the death of a person within the family and/or community. This is time to remain quiet and maintain peace for the loved one's spirit to pass through safely.
- **Kinship system** refers to cultural requirements and obligations relevant to a person's position within their community and family structure. This is where important governing decisions for community are made, and a person's role can affect how they navigate two worlds (cultural and western). It is important to understand that Aboriginal people are part of a complex and well-connected system. This is embedded in Aboriginal people's lives and will be a priority.

It's important to:

- Routinely ask all people whether they identify as being Aboriginal.
- Be open and honest with the people at all times, and acknowledge their distrust and/or discomfort
- Avoid creating a power imbalance where you are the 'expert'. Instead, try to form a respectful partnership where you work together
- Be prepared to admit limited knowledge and always seek advice if you are unsure
- Be aware that the people may be experiencing more than one issue (eg: unemployment, alcohol and other substance abuse, etc)
- Ask if the person is safe to return home or to community. If not, support them to find somewhere safe to go and work on strategies for keeping safe

Useful tips

- It's important to be aware of these 'common practices'. Asking 'why' questions around these practices can make the people feel uncomfortable. It's helpful to ask if they have cultural responsibility and if there is a way you can assist to reduce their pressure - let the people guide you and work with them.
If you are told not to visit the community, don't go. If the people wish to see a specific gender, respect their choice and support where possible.
- Your people may not attend appointments or make contact during sorry business. You may need to reschedule. Make contact at an appropriate time and ask: 'are you okay and when will be a good time to meet?'
- Be aware that kinship structures exist. Remember a person may not be related but might be considered more important than a family member or equivalent of one. It's also important to know kinship structures can sometimes be a barrier when engaging with a person. Allow the people to lead and guide you.



Every Aboriginal person is an individual. Avoid making assumptions about them. Acknowledge their diversity and respect their cultural practice. Being respectful, positive and creating a safe relationship with the people is an important part of an Aboriginal person's healing. Recognise that healing and recovery are possible through this process.

*Within the Department of Health WA, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia. No disrespect is intended to our Torres Strait Islander colleagues and community.