

24 Tips for Culturally Sensitive Programming

The following is reprinted with permission from the United Nations Population Fund's *Guide to Working from Within: 24 Tips for Culturally Sensitive Programming*. Though not limited to mental health programs, the list contains valuable lessons for cultural sensitivity in mental health work. (The original list is available at <http://www.unfpa.org/culture/24tips/cover.htm>).

- 1. INVEST TIME IN KNOWING THE CULTURE IN WHICH YOU ARE OPERATING.** Understanding how values, practices and beliefs affect human behavior is fundamental to the design of effective programs. Nowhere is this understanding more important than in the area of power relations between men and women.
- 2. HEAR WHAT THE COMMUNITY HAS TO SAY.** Before designing a project, find out from community members what they hope to achieve. Soliciting their views on different aspects of a project, from the overall strategy to specific advocacy messages, can foster local acceptance and instill a sense of ownership.
- 3. DEMONSTRATE RESPECT.** Make an effort to show that you understand and respect the roles and functions of community leaders and groups, avoiding attitudes or language that may be perceived as patronizing.
- 4. SHOW PATIENCE.** A great deal of dialogue and awareness-raising may be needed to persuade others to accept new ways of thinking, especially ones that challenge beliefs closely tied to individual and social identity. Invest as much time as necessary to clarify issues and address any doubts. If questions are not resolved, they may resurface later and derail progress.
- 5. GAIN THE SUPPORT OF LOCAL POWER STRUCTURES.** Winning over those who wield power in a community, whether they be NGOs, women's groups, religious leaders or tribal elders, can be a crucial first step in gaining acceptance at the grass roots. Make sure your first encounter sends a positive message.
- 6. BE INCLUSIVE.** The best way to dispel mistrust is through a transparent process of consultation and negotiation involving all parties.
- 7. PROVIDE SOLID EVIDENCE.** Using evidence-based data, show what program interventions can achieve, such as saving lives. In addition to advocacy, such information can be used to clarify misconceptions and obtain support from policy makers and local power structures, including religious leaders. Credible evidence is especially important when the issues under discussion are controversial.
- 8. RELY ON THE OBJECTIVITY OF SCIENCE.** Addressing culturally sensitive issues in the context of [mental] health can help diffuse the strong emotions that may be associated with them. A technical or scientific perspective can make discussion and acceptance of such issues easier.
- 9. AVOID VALUE JUDGEMENTS.** Don't make judgments about people's behavior or beliefs. Rather, put your own values aside as you explore other people's thoughts and dreams, and how they think they can best achieve them.
- 10. USE LANGUAGE SENSITIVELY.** Be cautious in using words or concepts that may offend. Frame issues in the broader context of health and healthy families and communities.

- 11. WORK THROUGH LOCAL ALLIES.** Rely on local partners that have the legitimacy and capacity to influence and mobilize a community. Such partners have the added advantage of knowing what local people are likely to accept.
- 12. ASSUME THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR.** Don't presume to have all the answers. Give up control and listen to others express their views, share their experiences and form their own ideas and plans. In an environment charged with ethnic or religious differences, assuming the role of facilitator sends a message of neutrality.
- 13. HONOR COMMITMENTS.** Doing what you say you will do is a powerful way to build confidence and trust.
- 14. KNOW YOUR ADVERSARIES.** Understanding the thinking of those who oppose your views can be key to successful negotiations. Analyze the rationale on which they base their arguments and be ready to engage in an ongoing and constructive dialogue.
- 15. FIND COMMON GROUND.** Even with seemingly monolithic institutions there are different schools of thought. Look for areas of common interest that can provide entry points for working with nontraditional partners.
- 16. ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE.** When addressing harmful traditional practices, emphasize that both harmful and positive practices are found in all societies. This can help diffuse tensions around the challenging issues.
- 17. USE ADVOCACY TO EFFECT CHANGE.** Well-planned advocacy campaigns are particularly important when project goals are likely to provoke religious or cultural controversy.
- 18. CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN.** Give women the opportunity to [express themselves] and demonstrate their capabilities. This can help diminish false, culture-based beliefs about stereotypical gender roles.
- 19. BUILD COMMUNITY CAPACITY.** Reinforce a sense of ownership and ensure sustainability by strengthening the skills of community members, including health-care providers and peer educators.
- 20. REACH OUT THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE.** In many parts of the world, music and dance are popular cultural expressions. Use them to communicate new ideas, and be sure to involve young people in the creative process.
- 21. LET PEOPLE DO WHAT THEY DO BEST.** Often, an appropriate role for traditional or religious leaders is mobilizing communities or helping to reshape public opinion. Seek their engagement in these areas.
- 22. NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS.** Cultivating relationships requires an investment of energy, patience, and time. Don't allow them to disappear just because [work] has ended. Sustaining partnership beyond a single [consultation] allows trust to mature, increasing the chances for positive results over the long term.
- 23. CELEBRATE ACHIEVEMENTS.** Bringing accomplishments to the attention of others and publicizing success can create a sense of pride and reinforce community involvement.
- 24. NEVER GIVE UP.** Changing attitudes and behaviors can be an excruciatingly slow process, especially in closed societies. Don't expect to accomplish everything at once. Even small changes are significant, and may be more enduring over the long term.