

# Strategies for Successful Behavioral Health Engagement

## Minority Communities



### Let's Talk...

Communication is vital to engaging people in behavioral health services, and good communication skills are especially important when working with individuals from minority communities as they are less likely to receive treatment for mental illness and often receive a poorer quality of behavioral health care than their white counterparts. Understanding the cultural norms of Black and other minority individuals can improve the chances of successful treatment and engagement through effective communication.

As a behavioral health provider, your greatest asset is the trust you build with clients by valuing the cultural norms of the communities you seek to serve. Culturally competent practice is based on cultural humility and respect. It recognizes the fundamental role of culture to inform and shape worldview, beliefs, values, and attitudes, including those pertaining to mental health conditions, substance use, and help-seeking. Organizations and clinicians invested in advancing clinical practices take the time to become self-aware and to genuinely respect and understand the client and their perspective from their unique cultural, familial, and community experience.

A provider will find it difficult to meaningfully engage with clients from communities that they may know little about. What does trusting communication look like in different communities, and how can a provider improve connectedness to Ohio's wonderfully diverse communities of color? The following chart of minority population cultural norms and related strategies for culturally competent outreach and care was adapted from the work of the Susan Komen foundation and can be helpful when planning for behavioral health engagement.



## Community Values

## Strategies for Engagement

**Extended Family.** Racial and ethnic minorities generally come from a culture where grandparents, aunts, cousins, and other family members are thought of as part of the family.

When possible, take the necessary time and steps to include family members in outreach and education events.

**Faith.** In some communities, faith, worship, and strong religious affiliations are central to family and community.

Proactively and tactfully inquire about the patients' religion or faith. This can help inform how you share information. Try asking indirectly about faith and religion by asking questions about where a person turns to for support in difficult times.

**Fatalism.** Many minorities have a deep belief in fatalism. This belief that life events are guided by outside forces may lead some to believe that illness, disease, and death are out of their control. This belief is closely related to fear of the unknown.

Educate patients on the science of their illnesses. Share that managing their mental health can help them to better enjoy their time with friends and family. Encourage your patients to take control of their health by taking personal action based on the information and strategies you provide. Explain the importance of knowing what's normal for them and making healthy lifestyle choices.

**Respect.** In general, minority populations, including African Americans place a strong emphasis on showing respect to elders and authority figures.

Be respectful by using formal rather than informal words when addressing or speaking to groups. Speak in a sincere manner, avoiding use of jargon or clinical acronyms.

**Trusting Relationships.** For many African Americans, creating a relationship is a priority. Many may prefer personal relationships over formal relationships and tend to take an interest in others. Most people are more satisfied with services when they trust their service provider. Minorities are no exception.

Follow through when you say you will do something. Build relationships with leaders that are trusted by community members. Learn about the community and its priorities and ask community members which resources would be most valuable to their community. Remember that building meaningful relationships and earning the client's trust takes time.

**Food.** As in all cultures, food plays an important role in minority communities and is often central to social interactions.

When hosting events, encourage sharing of culturally enjoyed food and join the group in appreciating the food.

Use of culturally competent communication practices can enhance a clinician's credibility, display caring and understanding, and promote trust. For Black and other minority individuals who may have experienced hardship, acknowledgement of the importance of their cultural norms can promote the development of positive treatment relationships, consistent participation in treatment activities, and improved treatment outcomes. The successful use of such skills by a provider reinforces the benefit of culturally competent practice and motivates additional curiosity, learning, and skill development that will further enhance the cultural competence of the behavioral health care organization.

For other tips and information on improving cultural competence:

TIP 59: Improving Cultural Competence (SAMHSA).

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/TIP-59-Improving-Cultural-Competence/SMA15-4849>

Cultural and Linguistic Competency (Office of Minority Health- Health and Human Services).

<https://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=1&lvlID=6>