

CHART



Applying Culturally-Responsive Communication in Black and African American Communities

Understanding cultural norms can help you to better reach, communicate with and educate your audience. When you meet someone new, you should always remember to be open and respectful of their beliefs.

Black and African American Cultural Norms

The Black and African American community is very ethnically, socio-economically and culturally diverse. It is important to understand the community as a whole as well as the history, cultural traditions and trends of the local communities with whom you are seeking to connect. The experiences of Blacks and African Americans can vary widely by state, city or even by block. When working with a group of people that is new to you, it is best to try to fully understand their culture and any issues that affect their ability to understand and use the information you will give to them. The way you communicate with an individual or audience should be influenced by their cultural norms, faith and other social factors. There are some norms that are common among the Black and African American Community. Below are examples of a few and ways to improve communication with the communities you serve.

NOTE

Understanding cultural norms is an important part of communication. But, it is important to avoid making decisions about people based only on their culture. Black and African American people do not all share the same culture. The cultural norms listed below may apply to most or only some of your audience. Try to learn about your audience's values and beliefs before applying these communication strategies.



For information specific to Black immigrants to the U.S., see [*Health Care Perceptions and Barriers to Access Among Black Immigrant Populations.*](#)

Cultural Norms and Strategies for Communication

Cultural Norm	Description	Strategies for Communication
<p>Community and family</p>	<p>Blacks and African Americans generally come from a culture where grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins, godparents and close friends are thought of as part of the family.</p> <p>Maintaining close connections with extended family members is important in Black and African American families. Blacks and African Americans may refer to a variety of people as family, including relatives, friends and even people in their wider social network¹. Grandparents are an especially key part of the family unit².</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When possible, include family members in outreach and education events. Many Blacks and African Americans rely on the support and guidance of others to help make decisions. Family and friends are often involved in the decision-making process about health care³.
<p>Faith and religion</p>	<p>Faith, church and strong religious affiliations are often central to family and community life in the Black and African American culture⁴.</p> <p>Many Blacks and African Americans attend weekly religious services as well as pray daily. This community also tends to believe in God with absolute certainty and believe in miracles³.</p> <div data-bbox="483 1528 863 1864" style="border: 1px solid purple; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; margin: 10px auto; width: fit-content;">  <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Outreach and Education to Faith-Based Organizations</u></p> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can be very important to find out about participants' religion or faith. This can help inform how you share information about strategies for relieving stress when someone in the audience, or someone an audience member knows, has been diagnosed with breast cancer. However, directly asking, "What religion do you practice?" or "What is the faith you follow?" is not as effective as asking more indirectly about where a person turns for support in difficult times³. • You could also evoke religious values and beliefs to motivate your audience to take personal action for a healthier life. For example, if you are giving a presentation in a church, you might say that God created our bodies and that it is important to care for them, as they are a gift that God has given us. • Another strategy is to engage clergy members during outreach and education events. Clergy can also be trained to deliver key messages during an event or sermon.

Cultural Norm	Description	Strategies for Communication
Respect	<p>In general, Black and African American populations place a strong emphasis on showing respect to elders and authority figures. Black and African American elders have traditionally been treated with great respect within their families³. However, many Black and African American families are not necessarily patriarchal. Many families believe that either the father or the mother can take the role of the decision maker⁴.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show respect by using formal rather than informal words when addressing or speaking to people and groups. • Speak in a clear and sincere manner and encourage questions². For example, do not use jargon or acronyms like “CBE” for clinical breast exam. Your audience may not be familiar with these terms. • Familiarize yourself with the audience — including demographic information, cultural norms, educational and literacy levels and available resources. This will allow you to show that you have taken the time to understand the circumstances, interests and needs of your audience. • Remember that gaining your audience’s respect may take time. Do not expect every new audience or member to accept you or your message right away.
Personal and community relationships	<p>Many Blacks and African Americans prefer personal relationships over formal relationships and tend to take a personal interest in others. Creating relationships within the community is a priority.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When interacting with your audience, ask questions about family, friends, work or the neighborhood where people live. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have children? How many? • How old are your children? • What school do your children attend? • What neighborhood are you from? • Share your own background, life stories and pictures. This will help you connect, whether in a one-to-one conversation or within a group. • When reaching out to a community, find local leaders and introduce yourself and your work. Learn about the community and its priorities. Ask about who may already be doing work similar to yours and what resources would be most valuable. You can also ask for advice about the best person or people to partner with in the community. This engagement will display respect and trust in the community, which will increase the chance of success.

Cultural Norm	Description	Strategies for Communication
Trust	<p>Trust grows from respect and familiarity. On the other hand, mistrust can occur when people are unable to communicate their concerns or underlying hesitations about unfamiliar situations. Blacks and African Americans are more satisfied with services when they trust their service provider. Building that trusting relationship may take time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow through when you agree to do something for a person or group. • Build relationships with leaders or organizations that are trusted by community members. By doing so, you will have a greater reach into the community. Work with those trusted people/organizations to identify the community's priorities. Show that you are willing to help address some of the mutual priorities. Trusted entities in a community include churches, schools, hair salons and local family support organizations. • Remember that gaining your audience's trust may take time. Do not expect every new audience or member to accept you or your message right away.
Fatalism	<p>Fatalism generally refers to the belief that life events are guided by outside forces, and that people cannot do much to alter fate. Blacks and African Americans have a deep belief in fatalism, and are likely to believe that death and disease are largely out of their control⁵. This is an especially common belief among older Black and African American women, and it is important to keep in mind when conducting outreach and engagement with this community⁶.</p> <p>Closely related to fatalism is fear of the unknown, which can stem from a lack of knowledge or information⁵.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage your audience to take control of their health by taking personal action on the breast cancer information they learned. • Explain the importance of knowing their risk, getting screened, knowing what is normal for them and making healthy lifestyle choices. • Share that having a goal to live a long and healthy life makes it possible to enjoy time with family. • Share that taking care of our bodies and following recommendations for a healthy life can help to prevent us from being a burden for our families.
Food	<p>As in other cultures, food plays an important role in Black and African American culture. Many Blacks and African Americans take pride in preparing foods specific to their culture. Food is often seen as being central to social interactions⁷.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide culturally-appropriate food at group presentations. • It is also important for you to partake in shared meals; refusing to do so could offend group members.

Cultural Beliefs and Health

It is important to consider how cultural beliefs impact health behaviors. Examples of ways cultural beliefs impact health behaviors include²:

- How illnesses/diseases and their causes are perceived
- Understanding of health, healing and wellness
- Use of traditional and non-traditional approaches to health care
- Use of informal sources of information, such as family and friends
- Decisions about health care and support
- Beliefs about biases within health care systems
- Behaviors and attitudes toward health care providers

Remember that, like other cultural norms, beliefs about health may not apply to the people and groups you meet. However, it is important to understand and address some of the barriers your audience may face in accessing health information and health care. Always ask questions in order to understand how your audience's culture and experiences may affect their health behaviors. This will help you to better communicate with your audience, share information that is appropriate and useful, help them overcome barriers and empower them to take action.

Next, we provide a table that lists common perceptions of the health care system. This table can help you to prepare for some of the barriers you may face working with the Black and African American community.

Health Care Perceptions and Strategies for Communication

Perception	Description	Strategies for Communication
<p>Belief that physicians should initiate conversations about health issues</p>	<p>Blacks and African Americans who are unfamiliar with screening and symptoms of breast cancer may be unaware of or uncomfortable addressing these topics with a physician. In these instances, your audience may expect their health care provider to lead the discussion and make them aware of what they should do⁶.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize the importance of discussing breast health with health care providers, including asking when they should receive a CBE and/or mammogram. • Tell your audience not to wait for their health care provider to bring up topics of breast health first. If they have questions or concerns, they can initiate the discussion.
<p>Mistrust of the healthcare system</p>	<p>Many Blacks and African Americans are wary of the health care system and prefer to keep their illness to themselves⁸. Perceptions of mistrust and unfair treatment are common among this population⁵. Older Blacks and African Americans, especially, may be suspicious of clinicians because of experiences of past generations of Blacks and African Americans with health care⁴.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with your audience the importance of finding a health care provider they can trust. • If your audience members do describe mistrust, ask them if they have considered finding a new doctor or practice. They can ask friends and family for suggestions for a new doctor. Suggest taking a friend or family member to their appointment to help them feel comfortable. • Suggest asking their health care provider what medical terms mean if they do not understand⁸. <div data-bbox="1003 1283 1382 1829" style="border: 1px solid purple; border-radius: 15px; padding: 15px; margin-top: 20px;">  <p>For more information about mistrust, see: <u><i>Mistrust in the Health Care System among Black and African American Communities and The Tuskegee Syphilis Study.</i></u></p> </div>

Perception	Description	Strategies for Communication
Fear of breast cancer screening	Many Black and African American women, as with women of other races, are nervous about screening procedures, particularly mammograms ⁵ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell your audience that it is very normal to be fearful of being screened for a variety of reasons. • Share some techniques to calm their fears, including breathing techniques and talking with their doctor or a friend that has been through the screening process. • Educate them about what the process entails and what they should expect to feel physically and emotionally.
Competing priorities	Some Blacks and African Americans, as with individuals of other races, face complex social and environmental situations in their daily life. As a result, their priority may be to manage acute medical issues (e.g. asthma, injuries, etc.) and non-medical issues (e.g. transportation, family concerns, etc.) before addressing their long-term health conditions, such as breast cancer. Breast cancer screening may become a lower priority for some Black and African American women ⁵ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate your audience about how important seeking care can be for their overall health, quality of life and longevity for the individual and for the family overall. • Discuss strategies for keeping an appointment while meeting other priorities. Ask if they need help making an appointment. • Ask if they need help figuring out transportation to the clinic or hospital. • Stress the importance of early detection and the benefits of diagnosis at an early stage versus a late stage.

1 "Communicating with your African American Patient," University of Washington Medical Center Culture Clues™ , last modified November 1, 2007, <http://depts.washington.edu/pfes/cultureclues.html>.

2 Staples, R. "An Overview of Race and Marital Status," in Black Families, 3rd ed. H.P. McAdoo (New York: SAGE Publications), 269-273.

3 Sahgal, N. and Smith, G. "A Religious Portrait of African Americans," PewResearch Religion and Public Life Project, last modified 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-African-Americans/>

4 Cartaret, M. "Health Care for African American Patients/Families," Dimensions of Culture, last modified May 2011, <http://www.dimensionsofculture.com/2011/05/health-care-for-African-American-patientsfamilies/>

5 Peek, M., Sayad, J., and Markwardt, R. "Fear, Fatalism and Breast Cancer Screening in Low-Income African American Women: The Role of Clinicians and the Health Care System," J Gen Intern Medicine 23 (2008): 1847-1853.

6 Young, R.F., Schwartz, K., and Booza, J. "Medical Barriers to Mamography Screening of African American Women in a High Cancer Mortality Area: Implications for Cancer Educators and Health Providers," J Canc Educ. 26 (2011): 262-269.

7 Wilson, E. "Feeding the Soul: African American Food Culture," Georgetown University, Ignatius Seminar Program (2013).

8 "African American Outreach Guide," National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization Caring Connections (2008).