Communication: Communicating with Clients who are Non-English Speaking

What Is Communicating With Clients Who Are Non-English Speaking?

› In a social service setting, communicating with clients who are non-English-speaking or limited English proficient involves confirming that the client is understood by the social worker and, in turn, that the client understands information provided by the social worker

• What: In the United States, the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice state that “social workers shall seek to provide or advocate for the provision of information, referrals, and services in the language appropriate to the client, which may include the use of interpreters” (NASW, 2015)

• How: Having a client work with a social worker who is fluent in the language of the client is the preferred method for communicating with clients who are non-English-speaking or have limited English proficiency. The use of a trained professional interpreter who is fluent in both English and the client’s language is acceptable. The interpreter should be trained in standards of confidentiality as well as terms and concepts specific to the agency’s or facility’s programs and activities (NASW, 2015)

• Where: Communication with clients who are non-English-speaking or limited English proficient can occur in any social service setting, including inpatient and outpatient facilities and in the home

• Who: All social workers should be able to communicate with a client who is non-English-speaking with the assistance of a trained professional interpreter. The social worker should help with arranging language-assistance services. Depending on the client’s preference, it may be appropriate for family members and other nonprofessional caretakers to be present during this communication. Use of family members or significant others as language interpreters should be avoided as this introduces the risk of misinterpretation due to familial bias and may compromise the client’s right to confidentiality. If no interpreter is available, the social worker should coordinate transfer of the client to a facility in which the appropriate language capacity is available

What Is the Desired Outcome of Communicating With Clients Who Are Non-English-Speaking?

› Effective communication between clients and social workers is fundamental to the delivery of quality care. With clients who are non-English-speaking, the use of professional interpreters or social workers who speak the client’s language fluently

• facilitates the client’s access to care

• reduces discrimination based on language barriers

• increases the client’s understanding of his/her condition and treatment

• decreases risk for misunderstanding of treatment recommendations

• increases accuracy of the biopsychosocialspiritual history

• increases the client’s ability to adhere to the prescribed treatment plan

• allows the client to participate in making decisions regarding the plan of care

• allows the client to give informed consent for care provided
Why Is Communicating With Clients Who Are Non-English Speaking Important?

- Effective communication with clients who are non-English-speaking reduces language barriers and prevents many potential detrimental consequences, including
  - extended wait time before initiating services
  - lower client satisfaction
  - fewer services being provided
  - greater risk for misdiagnosis
  - less effective management of symptoms
  - increased risk for legal liability due to malpractice and claims of lack of informed consent to care

Facts and Figures

- According to the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, 61.4 million persons in the United States speak a language other than English (United States Census Bureau, 2014)
- Individuals who are non-English-speaking or with limited English proficiency experience higher levels of poverty and disability, lower levels of education and employment, and are more likely to be uninsured (Ryan, 2013)
- When controlling for other factors, Latinos and Asian Americans with limited English proficiency in whom a mental health disorder has been diagnosed are less likely to seek mental health treatment, more likely to remain untreated for longer periods of time, and have a lower likelihood of lifetime treatment than their English-proficient counterparts (Bauer et al., 2010)
- In a study that included 242 Spanish-speaking clients, investigators found that in-person services of a professionally trained medical interpreter increased client satisfaction 4-fold (Bagchi et al., 2011)
- Addressing communication barriers and providing information/education in the client’s preferred language can help reduce diagnostic errors, increase client satisfaction, and improve client utilization of resources (Smith & Pietrzyk, 2016)

What You Need to Know Before Communicating With Clients Who Are Non-English Speaking

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandates that no one be denied publicly funded services based on “national origin.” This includes clients who are non-English-speaking or have limited English proficiency (United States Department of Labor, n.d.)
- When caring for clients who have limited English proficiency, social workers should maintain awareness of their own cultural beliefs and any biases or stereotypes they may hold that can negatively influence the quality of the client care provided
- In order to give informed consent for treatment, the client must understand the risks and benefits of the treatment. Informed consent documents signed by clients who are non-English-speaking and who were not provided with appropriate language assistance may be considered invalid
  - Informed-consent documents should be available in the client’s language whenever possible. When not possible, evidence of the verbal interpretation of the consent forms should be documented in the client’s file
- Thorough documentation of the use of interpretive services is important because it provides evidence of the effort made to increase client understanding of treatment information; it can be useful in cases of malpractice, medical errors, and claims of lack of informed consent
- Preliminary steps to be performed before communicating with clients who are non-English-speaking include
  - reviewing the facility protocol for communicating with clients who are non-English-speaking, if one is available
  - reviewing the client’s record to determine if language assistance services have been used in the past
- Gather supplies, which may include
  - notices written in the client’s preferred language informing him/her of the right to receive language assistance services
  - audiovisual aids (e.g., diagrams, charts) for the information to be discussed
  - written information to be discussed in the client’s preferred language

Social Work Responsibilities in Regard to Clients Who Are Non-English Speaking

- Follow facility protocol for the provision of a bilingual social worker or a professional interpreter
- Perform the following when providing client information and education with an interpreter:
  - Write down your questions and an outline of the most important educational information in advance whenever possible
  - Introduce yourself to the interpreter and establish rapport
• Inform the interpreter of your goals regarding assessing the client’s biopsychosocialspiritual history and providing education and care
• Introduce the interpreter and the client to each other and allow time for them to communicate to increase client comfort, reduce anxiety, and improve engagement. Speak slowly in short sentences and avoid the use of professional terminology and jargon
• Maintain eye contact with the client if this is congruent with the client’s cultural practices
• Use visual aids (e.g., diagrams, pictures, translated written materials, if available) when appropriate during the discussion to reinforce verbal information
• Repeat one or more of your statements if client assessment signifies poor comprehension
• Ask the client if he/she has any questions

› When a facility-approved, professional interpreter is unavailable, attempt to overcome language barriers by using the following strategies:
• Greet the client using his/her last name or both first and last name as is culturally appropriate for the client
• Assess if the client speaks another language in which you are fluent or that is spoken by a professional interpreter who is available
  – If a professional interpreter who speaks the client’s other language is available, contact him/her and schedule his/her assistance; attempt to communicate with the client that the interpreter will be present soon
• Repeat your statements frequently and use audiovisual aids, if available
• Use short, simple sentence structure; speak in the active voice; use simple words; and avoid using complex professional terminology and jargon
• When possible, use words that you know in the client’s preferred language
• Discuss one topic at a time
• Talk directly to the client and maintain eye contact
• Assess client understanding by asking him/her to restate the information or perform a return demonstration of a procedure

› Document the following information in the client’s medical record:
• How the need for language assistance services was determined
• How and by whom language assistance services were provided
• Language used and time and date of language assistance services
• Length of the client encounter

› Social workers should practice with awareness of and adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; and become knowledgeable of the NASW ethical standards as they apply to clients who are non-English-speaking and practice accordingly (National Association of Social Workers, 2015)

Other Interventions That May Be Necessary Before, During, or After Communicating With Clients Who Are Non-English Speaking

› Other members of the treatment team should be informed of the client’s need for language assistance services
› The social worker should take responsibility for coordinating appropriate language assistance services for the client and the other treatment-teammembers

What Social Work Models Are Used When Communicating With Clients Who Are Non-English Speaking?

› Any established social work model can be used when communicating with clients who are non-English-speaking

Red Flags

› When attempting to communicate with client who appear to be non-English-speaking, assess for the following signs that may indicate lack of effective communication:
• Efforts made by the client to change the subject
• Lack of questions after receiving information
• A blank or confused expression and/or avoidance of eye contact
• Head nodding and smiling do not necessarily indicate client understanding
› When communicating with clients who are non-English-speaking, avoid speaking too loudly because the client may think that you are angry or yelling
Factors that can compromise effective communication with non-English-speaking clients include failing to offer an interpreter, using children as interpreters, speaking disrespectfully to people with low or no English proficiency, using social workers not trained in the use of interpreters, and using phone interpreters (Sawrikar, 2013)

What Do I Need to Teach the Client/Client's Family?
› Confirm that client(s) and family members are aware of their rights regarding access to language assistance services at all hours of operation and at no additional cost

References