



PRACTISING CULTURAL SAFETY AND HUMILITY IN THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

This resource aims to support cultural safety and humility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some areas to consider as you provide care:

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Conduct your work through a trauma-informed lens. Many Indigenous people have had direct or indirect negative experiences with the government and health care system. The trauma of residential schools, “Indian hospitals”, previous epidemics, and government-enforced regulations on entering and exiting Indigenous territories is still suffered both as lived experiences and as pain carried through generations. There remains a high level of distrust for government and health authorities, which can be a barrier to an effective patient-physician partnership.

Be mindful that an Indigenous person may be suffering fear, anxiety and flashbacks to historical trauma when they present to you. Recognize the physical signs, such as an increased rate of breathing, shallow breaths, muscle tension or clenching of jaw or fists and sweating. Psychological signs may include guarded responses to questions and an unwillingness to share personal stories or parts of their medical history. Patients may also seem to disengage from the conversation, appearing to “tune out” or perhaps even coming across as very willing to please (for example, saying “yes” repeatedly).

BE MINDFUL OF DISPARITIES

Indigenous communities and individuals are often disproportionately affected by health, geographic and economic vulnerabilities. These disparities, such as access to running water and poor, overcrowded housing mean that COVID-19 can disproportionately affect Indigenous communities and those who are already experiencing underlying conditions that can worsen COVID-19 symptoms.

Racial biases in the health care system may also make it more difficult for Indigenous patients to receive adequate care. It will be even more important to advocate for your patient.



BE OPEN AND EMPATHETIC

Practise active listening and learn from your patients about what's important to them. Holistic, whole-person care is valued in Indigenous cultures.

Be mindful that patients are facing unique challenges and uncertainty. They may not be feeling themselves. Exercise patience and understanding and pay attention to non-verbal communication whenever possible.

Seek patients' consent and give them choices whenever possible, such as choosing their preferred appointment medium (phone or video app) and selecting a time that works well for them to be able to hold a sensitive conversation.

TAKE TIME TO EXPLAIN

Patients can gain a sense of control and decrease their stress response when they understand why something is happening. Take time to explain the "why" behind what you are doing. For example, a patient may feel alarmed to see you in PPE. Explain that you are wearing it for the safety of the patient, the community and health care providers. Speak clearly, use appropriate language and be concise.

Be self-aware and practise in a reflective manner. Pause and identify when you may be feeling defensive, assertive or judgmental. These are often subconscious reactions that we should try to catch and examine. Employ humility, compassion and curiosity to explore instinctive or subconscious reactions. Balance strength with sensitivity. Reflecting on what may or may not have gone well in a consultation afterwards can be an excellent learning experience that might help us improve our practice.

MOVE TOWARDS SHARED GOALS

When you understand the context behind a patient's cultural values, experiences and beliefs, you can better engage in a conversation that builds towards mutual understanding and shared goals.

Ask Indigenous patients what values they have regarding their health and be open and curious about cultural practices and/or traditional medicines patient may be using to optimize their health. Rather than imposing one knowledge system over another, consider how the two can complement each other to lead to a better health outcome for the patient.

CULTURAL IMPACT AND MENTAL HEALTH

COVID-19 has altered how Indigenous communities and families gather, learn, celebrate, feast and dance. Communities have had to adapt the usual cultural practices that help them to feel safer and more connected. The pandemic may also trigger flashbacks of past lived or remembered traumas. Be mindful of the toll that these factors will take on a patient's mental health.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED CARE

The recent increase in access to virtual care and telemedicine allows for greater access to care and support in rural and remote areas, which we hope will have a long-term benefit. Telemedicine should be used to enhance the face-to-face interaction and connection that is so important in family medicine. Identify safe opportunities to be visible, accessible and present in-community.

RESOURCES

BC College of Family Physicians Covid-19 Information
<https://bccfp.bc.ca/covid-19/>

First Nations Health Authority
<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/communicable-diseases-e-control/coronavirus>

UBC: Indigenous Patient-Led CPD
<https://ubccpd.ca/rural/indigenous-patient-led-cpd>

Indian Residential School Survivors Society:
604-985-4465 or Toll-free: **1-800-721-0066**

KUU-US Indigenous Crisis Phone Line:
1-800-558-8717

