

tips for working with people of **AFRICAN DESCENT**

People of African descent represent a diverse community at different stages of development and with different issues, languages, needs and expectations. Therefore, bear in mind the diversity of situations concerning people of African descent.

OVERVIEW

- There are over 10,000 Africans in Guilford County. The majority of them are from Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, and Niger. Most Africans are here as either refugees (fleeing war and persecution) or immigrants (documented and undocumented).
- Many sub-Saharan Africans immigrate to the United States to better themselves economically, for the sake of education, and often because of war.
 - It is a very difficult and stressful process to acquire papers to come to the United States.
 - In African countries, men usually get first priority in attending educational institutions.
 - For a woman everything depends on her relationship with her husband.



LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

- The languages spoken by Africans include Arabic, French, English, Swahili, Portuguese, Somali, and many other ethnic/tribal languages. Many Africans speak at least two or more languages.
 - Talk, discussion, and laughter are important parts of a relationship.
 - Eye contact is seen as attentiveness; it has nothing to do with trust.
 - Africans become uncomfortable with a long period of silence.

RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

- Religion and spirituality are very important to Africans. Most Africans are either Christians (Protestant, Catholic, Jehovah's Witnesses or non-denominational) or Muslims. Religion provides an anchor for most individuals, especially in times of need.
- Muslims make up about 20% of the world's population. This is the fastest growing major religion, with non-Arab Muslims by a ratio of three to one. The term "Islam" means submission to the will of God, and the person who submits is called Muslim.

- The obligations of Islam include: recitation of the Shahadah (bearing witness to faith), praying five times daily, fasting, giving alms (at least a fortieth of your income to the poor), and making a pilgrimage to the holy places of Islam.
- Friday is observed as a day of rest.

FAMILY

- Extended family is traditionally very important among Africans. Marriages, births and deaths are celebrated, expressing a reverence for life.
 - Men/Husbands are the head of their family and make most decisions.
 - Politeness and respect are important traits in these cultures.
 - Extended family members are often used as advisors.
- Africans are finding their traditional roles changing. Men are doing more domestic work, women are going to work, and youth are taking more active roles at home.

RELATIONSHIPS

- Trust is an essential element of the helping relationship.
 - Members of the African community are much more likely to reveal personal information if they really trust you.
 - Trust is built through spending time together in less formal occasions.
 - Members are more likely to trust and bond with a person rather than with an agency.
 - Labels are very offensive! (e.g. ADHA, Bi-polar, etc.).
 - If you need to gather personal information, it is important to explain why it is needed.

HEALTH CARE

- Most Africans, especially those who do not speak English, have difficulty accessing the seemingly complicated American health care system. Some of the challenges include:
 - limited understanding of English.
 - lack of transportation.
 - cultural and systematic differences – different or biased concepts of health and wellness.
- Some Africans use traditional herbs and home remedies for medical problems. It is a good idea to ask if they are taking any medication from their native home. Do not assume, ask questions.
 - Use of traditional medicines is common practice. Africans may be receptive to combining traditional practices with Western treatments.
 - Prayer is also often used as a vehicle for healing.
- Africa has been particularly hard-hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
 - Life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to fall to 30-years-old within this decade due to a continual increase in the spread of HIV/AIDS.
 - Most African communities do not talk openly about sex or sexual-related illnesses/issues.

- Many of those who are infected with HIV/AIDS are in denial, often because of the stigma attached to having this disease.
- Mental illness is viewed in different ways depending on the culture and degree of western acculturation.
 - There is no concept of mental illness. Only the extreme is noticed and termed “crazy.”
 - It is often seen as the result of something the family has done. Family members may believe they need to do something to appease their ancestors.
 - It is sometimes viewed as the result of some misdeed which has occurred within the family.
 - It is not something that is openly discussed. A friend may approach and say, “I have concern because you are doing...” To recommend a counselor is an insult.
 - Family is often ostracized if mental illness is revealed.

CUSTOMS & LIFESTYLE

- Most Africans eat meat and cooked vegetables, and most of their food is fried. Most Africans offer visitors to their home food and drinks as a gesture of hospitality.
- Physical activity is not a big part of Africans’ lives. Because of their busy schedules and the expense of going to athletic facilities in this country, most of them, especially women, are physically inactive.
 - Some Africans see participation in physical activity as a waste of the time which they would otherwise have used to make money.
 - It is not common to see women taking part in physical activities, especially Muslim women.
- THERE IS NO HURRY IN AFRICA!!!

EMPLOYMENT

- Africans work in different sectors ranging from professional to non-professional careers.
 - Most Africans are getting into professions such as nursing, accounting, and engineering.
 - Those who have limited proficiency in English work in factories, gas stations and groceries stores – usually places where they do not qualify for health insurance.
 - Most of them have more than one job and work long hours to support their immediate family, as well as their families back in their home country.

OTHER PROBLEMS

- Domestic violence and divorce cases are on the increase.
- Youth are becoming more noncompliant with their traditional values and customs.
- Substance abuse is on the increase.
- Alcohol consumption is accepted by most communities except for Muslims and women.
- Sexuality is not discussed, especially within the Muslim faith.