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Arrange cultural events

Cultural events are an enjoyable way to learn more about other cultures. When planning various activities, try to include all the cultural or social groups that are represented by the people you are providing support to. For example, you and the team may arrange:

- ▶ an Italian music day
- ▶ a regular Friday lunch with different cuisines
- ▶ outings to culturally specific festivals, such as Chinese New Year in Chinatown
- ▶ guest speakers to talk about a particular culture or social group.

Reflect on your own social and cultural bias

When you work in a care environment, you need to recognise and respect diversity and understand that everyone must be treated with courtesy and respect regardless of their race, religion, gender, beliefs or culture. People have a right to be different and everyone must be treated equally. You need to recognise and understand different cultures and how cultural differences can affect your work.

Keeping a reflective journal is a good way to examine your personal experiences of working with culturally diverse groups of people, and to reflect on your own social and cultural bias.

Here is a reflective cycle that is commonly used to help people think about and make sense of their personal experiences.



At an individual level

- ▶ At an individual level, cultural competence involves becoming culturally aware. It is the ability to:
 - identify and challenge one’s own assumptions, values and beliefs
 - develop empathy for other people and cultures
 - see the world from a different point of view.
- ▶ A culturally competent individual is likely to have:
 - a strong knowledge of how one’s own culture shapes attitudes, perceptions and behaviours
 - a willingness to learn about other people’s cultures
 - specific knowledge of the language, customs and values of particular cultures
 - the skills to feel comfortable and communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds
 - an unwillingness to stereotype individuals from certain cultures or ethnicities.

Cultural safety

Cultural safety is the result of cultural competence. It describes an environment that accepts all people and is free of discrimination. It is a vital part of every organisation, at every level, in every work role.

The characteristics of a culturally safe workplace

- ▶ Treat everyone with dignity
- ▶ Respect people’s culture, language, knowledge, experience and obligations to each other
- ▶ Allow no assault on a person’s identity
- ▶ Provide pathways to empowerment and self-determination
- ▶ Allow people to promote, develop and maintain their distinctive customs, traditions, procedures and practices
- ▶ Acknowledge individual differences
- ▶ Work with people where they are, not where someone thinks they should be

Example

Identify and reflect on own social and cultural perspectives and biases

Rohini has just started working in a diverse care environment. Although she is aware of her own cultural background, she has little understanding of the other cultures represented in the facility and how they might impact on the behaviour of the new individuals to whom she is providing support. To improve her cultural awareness, she asked her manager if there were any resources with ethno-specific information available for her to read. She was pleased to find out that not only were there resources, but she was about to complete some cultural competence training as part of her induction.



Communication

Aboriginal English may be difficult to understand at first. You may need to use an interpreter so that the person can express themselves in their chosen language.

Indigenous people are more likely to respond to an indirect question than a direct one. They may feel suspicious about the reasons for blunt questions. They may also not respond to a question where the answer is already known.

In some Aboriginal cultures, looking a person directly in the eye is considered rude or disrespectful. Likewise, pointing at a person when trying to emphasise something should be avoided.



Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is a natural part of Aboriginal communication. For instance, silence does not mean an Aboriginal person does not understand. Instead, they may be listening, thinking, remaining non-committal or waiting for community support or input.

Time and trust may be required before people offer their opinion. They may also prefer to defer to an older or more authoritative person. It is also common for Aboriginal meetings to be punctuated by long periods of silence and thought.



Art and religion

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples express their ceremonial and religious life through art, songs and dance. Art forms such as body painting, ground sculpture, bark painting, wood carving and rock painting and engraving can represent multiple meanings about Aboriginal ownership of the land and their relationships to ancestral beings. Often these arts forms are believed to be manifestations of original ancestors who possessed special powers.

Current issues and realities

The following information explains some of the current issues and realities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Loss of culture, land, identity and Indigenous law

The loss of culture that bound Indigenous communities together and the breaking up of their complex kinship system has contributed to the loss of their identity.

The two main factors that contribute to this cultural crisis are:

- ▶ the dispossession of Indigenous Australians from their land and subsequent inability to practise their rites and ceremonies; Aboriginal identity is closely tied up with their relationship to their lands
- ▶ the imposition of non-Indigenous law that has broken down a number of strict Aboriginal customs and watered down their culture.

There is also a better chance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples returning and utilising the service if, at time of discharge, they are reminded that they and their people are welcome to use the service.

Referral protocols

Referring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to other services may not be as straightforward as anticipated, due to their complex kinships. They may want to consult first with other members of the family regarding the referral and should be allowed the time to do this.

Reception and inquiry services

The reception or inquiry service should show empathy and positive communication when dealing with any information or service inquiry. An understanding of how family relationships work, skin systems, death and dying helps avoid misunderstandings. For example, refrain from mentioning a deceased relative's name, as this is taboo in many Indigenous cultures.

Diagnostic services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may not like their blood or urine being taken. They may find it shameful or embarrassing. So an interpreter or an Aboriginal liaison officer should be involved in explaining the necessity of taking specimens as a process of treatment.

Inpatient services

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship systems emphasises that everyone is related to one another, so in most Aboriginal affairs, including sickness, death and ceremonies, the whole community participates. The presence of extended family may assist the individual's recovery and wellness. If you work in a hospital setting, visiting rules may need to be flexible to accommodate the many relatives of the sick individual who may visit at different times.

Non-inpatient and community services

Learning about Indigenous people can de-construct the negative stereotypes and assumptions that many people have about Indigenous Australians. An open mind can make a difference in your dealing with Indigenous people as non-inpatient customers of community services. For example, practise listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, rather than telling them what to do; show empathy and effective communication skills to avoid conflict and misunderstanding.

Screening services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may have personal barriers that make it difficult for them to participate in screening services, such as breast, cervical, bowel or prostate scans and tests. Many Indigenous Australians, particularly women, do not like taking their clothes off in the presence of carers/workers.



Age

You need to consider cultural views on the social significance of youth or age, and the specific needs of young people and elderly people.



Disability

You also need to consider different cultural views of disability and care of family members with a disability, putting the person before the disability, and facilities for people with a disability. Focus on the person, not the disability.



Gender preferences

You need to be aware that some cultural groups have quite definite views on the opposite sex providing services to individuals. Work practices may need to be adapted to allow for different cultural views and protocols governing interaction and physical contact with the opposite gender. For example, a single woman may refuse to be alone in an office with a male, or a male may be uncomfortable with being interviewed by a pregnant woman.



Sexual preferences

It is also important to consider cultural views of homosexuality, transgender and non-traditional partnerships.

Work inclusively

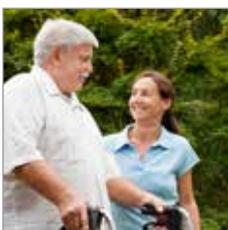
It is unrealistic to expect that every care worker will know all of the cultural practices and expectations of every diverse group in Australia. However, it is realistic to expect that you to acknowledge the potential areas of difference, and seek clarification before taking action.

The following outlines some questions you might ask.



Physical contact

- ▶ Is touching appropriate?
- ▶ Which part of the body should not be touched? For example, touching a person's head could be a cultural taboo for some cultural groups.
- ▶ Is it appropriate to touch or be touched by the opposite sex?



Eye contact

- ▶ Is it appropriate to make direct eye contact? For example, in some cultures, not having direct eye contact shows respect to others.



Topic 2

In this topic you will learn how to:

- 2A Value and respect diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace**

- 2B Contribute to workplace and professional relationships**

- 2C Keep the workplace safe**

Appreciate diversity and inclusiveness and their benefits

An effective care worker recognises and respects diversity and understands that everyone deserves to be treated with courtesy and respect regardless of their race, religion, gender, beliefs or culture. They understand that people have a right to be different and that everyone should be treated equally. They also recognise and understand different cultures, how these differences affect their work with people with support needs and co-workers and are able to address any personal prejudices.

Assisting individuals

People with support needs may require assistance with:

- ▶ maintaining their current way of life and living situation
- ▶ developing new skills
- ▶ maintaining existing skills
- ▶ forming new social networks and friendships
- ▶ coping with day-to-day living
- ▶ maintaining their independence
- ▶ learning to live and work in Australian society without fear or distress.

Your understanding

Your understanding of different cultural and social backgrounds can help you to meet the individual needs of each person with support needs. It will help you know what to say and what not to say; to behave in ways that show respect and do not cause offense; to create harmonious and enjoyable group situations, and to solve situations where conflict arises.

Your knowledge

Your knowledge will also help your understanding of the particular needs of people who have migrated to Australia to escape situations of political turmoil, war, poverty or fear of persecution. And, it will help you remember that there are often good reasons why two people from different cultural backgrounds may simply never get along with each other, no matter what you or anyone else tries to do to help.

A positive way forward

You may find there are others within your workplace who don't value and respect diversity and inclusiveness, or share your positive attitude to working with people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. You may find it frustrating to see and hear things that you don't agree with, or that you find offensive or intolerant. In these situations, you should simply do your best to be a positive role model for changing attitudes.

You can't force someone else to change. Remember, they too are a product of their own cultural background, upbringing, history and experiences. All you can do is work within your own job description and role model the behaviours and attitudes that you believe are right for each situation you encounter.

Discuss any problems with your supervisor, as they are there to help you learn to do your job better and more effectively.





People and language

Australians are becoming more and more diverse as a people. More than 40 per cent of Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born elsewhere. There are people from about 200 countries who speak many different languages. We are now a people of many colours, accents and styles of dress and appearance.



Religion and customs

With various cultures come diverse religions and customs. Sometimes other Australians take part in these, particularly through cultural festivals. Some of these religions, particularly Buddhism and Islam, have been taken up by people in the broader Australian community.

Appreciate the differences

It is important to appreciate and understand how diversity affects the way you communicate and work with people with support needs, their families and your co-workers.

Here are some of the cultural and social factors you may encounter in a diverse workplace and how to incorporate each element into your work.

Race

Race refers to a group of people who have similar features such as skin colour, type of hair, eye colour and other physical features.

Treat everyone equally regardless of the colour of their skin or where they are from.

Ethnic group

Ethnic groups have interests, history and cultural features in common. Cultural features include language, religion and the way people interact with each other. An example of an ethnic group is the Jewish people.

The predominant culture in many countries is often associated with a single ethnic group; for example, Italians. However, some Italians belong to other ethnic groups, for example; the Jewish, Albanian and Ethiopian ethnic groups who live in Italy.

Be aware of a person's ethnic group so you can understand and talk about their culture with them. This may help you avoid stereotyping people. An example of a stereotype is someone believing that all Italians love to eat pasta.

Language

Language refers to the way people communicate with each other, and is a very important part of a culture. Some common languages spoken in Australia are English, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Croatian, Macedonian, Turkish, Serbian and Hindi. Around 60,000 people in Australia speak an Australian Indigenous language.

A person with support needs may miss the opportunity to speak in their native language. If possible, arrange for someone who speaks their native language to come to talk with them.

Treat all staff and people with support needs equally

It is important to treat all people as equals. It doesn't matter which cultural group they belong to or the circumstances of their socio-economic background. All people deserve to be included and all people deserve your respect. This applies to your co-workers as well as people with support needs.

Try to remember the following.

Treat all people as equals

Don't speak in a patronising or demeaning manner.

Never make people from different cultures feel they and their opinions are not valued.

Don't speak loudly and slowly to people from another culture – it may seem like you think they are stupid.

Ensure you treat people with different gender preferences equally.

Sit down to speak to someone in a wheelchair, so they don't feel intimidated or powerless.

Communicate in a way that is appropriate for each person's abilities and age.

Discrimination

Discrimination is the act of treating someone unfairly or favouring others. Discrimination is never an acceptable behaviour in a care environment.

Here are some different forms of discrimination.

Age

Age discrimination is when a person is treated less favourably than another person in a similar situation, because of their age. For example, someone may not allow an older person to participate in a social activity or they might tell them they have to meet special rules. Many people don't realise that being ageist is wrong; however, Australia does have laws and rules that protect people from discrimination.

Disability

Disability discrimination is when a person with a disability is treated less favourably than a person without the disability in the same or similar circumstances.

For example, it would be disability discrimination if an organisation refused a person access to their building and services because they were blind and have a guide dog. It is also disability discrimination if the only way to enter a building is by a set of stairs because people with disabilities who use wheelchairs would be unable to enter the building.

Racial discrimination

Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)

The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* covers all of Australia and prohibits racial discrimination and offensive behaviour based on racial hatred. It covers discrimination based on race, colour, descent, and national or ethnic origin. It also protects those who may be discriminated against based on their association with people of a particular ethnicity. The Act applies to everyone in Australia and all organisations.

The *Racial Hatred Act 1995* (Cth) was added to the Racial Discrimination Act in 1995 and provides an avenue for people to complain about racist behaviour that offends, insults, humiliates or intimidates others in public. Exceptions to the law include when the behaviour is a matter of public interest (such as a newspaper report on racially-based violence), or is part of an academic discussion which is not malicious or spiteful. These exceptions often involve rights to free speech.

Sex discrimination

Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)

The *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* explains that it is unlawful to discriminate against someone based on their sex, marital status, pregnancy or potential pregnancy. It sets out laws against sexual harassment, as well as dismissal from work based on family duties, including pregnancy.

According to the Act, it is unlawful to refuse to provide goods or services, education or employment based on a person's sex. The Act also covers discrimination within awards and enterprise bargaining, insurance and superannuation, Commonwealth laws and programs, and accommodation.

Sexual harassment is included in the Act because it is a form of discrimination to treat a person unfairly because of their sex.

An exception to the Act includes when goods or services can only be applied to one sex, for example female or male-specific health care. Another exception covers employing a person to look after a child in the child's home. Sexual discrimination in the training and ordination of religious ministers is also not covered under the Act.

Human rights

Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (Cth)

The Australian Human Rights Commission (initially called the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) was established in 1986 to deal with breaches of anti-discrimination laws and to promote human rights education.

This Act only covers actions or policies of the Commonwealth.

The Act promotes human rights for all people, and covers most forms of discrimination not already covered in the other Acts, including discrimination on the basis of:

- ▶ criminal records
- ▶ marital status
- ▶ medical record
- ▶ political opinion
- ▶ religion
- ▶ sexual preference
- ▶ social origin
- ▶ trade union activity.

The legal process

The *Australian Human Rights Commission Act (AHRC Act) 1986* brings to Australian law a number of rights contained in international human rights law. You can make a complaint under the AHRC Act if you believe your human rights have been breached.

Consider the following points.

The basis of the AHRC Act 1986

- ▶ The following international instruments are declared under the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*:
 - The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
 - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
 - The Convention on the Rights of the Child
 - Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief
 - Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons and Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons.

Lodging a complaint

- ▶ If you lodge a complaint under the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*, it will be investigated and, if possible, resolved through conciliation. If conciliation is not successful – and if the Australian Human Rights Commission finds that your human rights have been breached – they will report it to the Attorney General and have the matter tabled in Parliament.

Important

- ▶ It is important to note that discrimination under the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* is not unlawful – instead, it is regarded as unfair conduct. Unlike the other anti-discrimination laws that the Commission has responsibilities under, you can not apply to have your complaint heard in court if conciliation is unsuccessful.

Adapted from Australian Human Rights Commission: www.humanrights.gov.au/complaints-about-breaches-human-rights.

Example

Contribute to workplace and professional relationships

Todd has worked for a number of years with a charitable organisation run by a church. He receives great satisfaction from his job. Prior to starting his job, Todd began a stable and long-term same-sex relationship. If asked about his sexuality, he does not hide it, but does not openly advertise his sexual preference. He has some close work colleagues with whom he and his partner socialise.



After working for the organisation for three years, Todd opens the intranet home page one morning to discover a biblical quote that portrays homosexuality in a negative light. Todd requests a meeting with management asking that it be removed. Several of his work colleagues attend the meeting in support.

Following this, Todd begins to be singled out and is told that his gay agenda does not belong in a Christian organisation. He is rostered on to work at times he has previously indicated he is unable to and his professionalism is questioned.

Rather than continue to experience this bullying and harassment, Todd resigns. Consequently, he experiences severe depression. He leaves his partner and loses contact with his work friends, becoming socially isolated.

Some people with support needs may access respite or recreation services as part of their care routines. This may be on an individual or group basis. Respite and recreation services provide excellent opportunities for assisting individuals to participate in culturally specific and relevant social activities.

Religious needs and ceremonial needs

All people must be allowed to celebrate festivals and special days. There are groups that help people meet their cultural and spiritual needs; for example, by meeting to discuss the culture, hold classes or organise social events.

Some local councils also hold festivals for different cultural groups so people can celebrate and share their cultural traditions. To assist, you could help to organise a dragon to come to the facility for Chinese New Year, or organise carol singing for Christmas.

You might also arrange for special decorations to celebrate a national day, such as bunches of daffodils for St David's Day, the Welsh national day.

Personal space and touching

Different cultures have different beliefs relating to touch. You must understand these beliefs so you don't upset people with support needs and the people you work with.

For example, men from Western Europe often hug and kiss each other on both cheeks when they meet. Australian men often slap each other on the back or shake hands. In many Asian cultures, touching in this manner is an invasion of their personal space.

The acceptable distance between two people interacting also varies between cultures. In some cultures, people stand quite close to each other when they talk. In others, people prefer a space between them and may feel uncomfortable or threatened if a person stands too close to them.

Solve problems

Solving problems is another way to make a workplace feel safe and secure.

Some facilities have residents committees to discuss any issues they have. These issues are then reported to management and dealt with accordingly. Issues might include the following:

- ▶ A group of people believe the air conditioning is set too high
- ▶ Some people want an extra ramp for better wheelchair access
- ▶ Some residents are concerned about the behaviour of a particular individual.

All people with support needs should be free to raise any complaint or dispute they have regarding the service and to have it resolved to their satisfaction. It is therefore important that residents' complaints or issues are taken seriously.



Care services will often have a form, procedure and policy that allows a person to make a complaint or request a change to service delivery. Many services also have a contact person, such as a program coordinator, to take care of any minor queries, questions and difficulties that may arise.



Impact of exclusion

A person from a marginalised group may be excluded on the basis of their physical, mental or emotional health needs from employment, leisure activities, community activities or receiving services. Exclusion, like discrimination, may compound a person's issues, such as their drug and alcohol use. Be aware of the person's specific needs and rights, and ensure they are met.



Impact of negative attitudes

A person may be subject to negative attitudes, such as stereotyping or prejudice. People may make assumptions about a person from a marginalised group, such as their ability to participate in the workplace, or in social or community activities. Negative attitudes can once again compound mental and emotional health issues, as a person may feel misunderstood or unsupported. If you observe negative attitudes towards marginalised groups, consult your supervisor and the workplace anti-discrimination policy. Be aware of your own bias or prejudice towards people from marginalised groups.

Protective factors of marginalised groups

Protective factors reduce the likelihood of risk. Protective factors can be individual factors, family or social factors or community factors. Identify the relevant factors that protect the groups you work with. Protective factors for obesity, for example, include good food and nutrition and exercise.

Here is a list of examples of protective factors for physical, mental and emotional health.

Physical protective factors

Protective factors against physical issues include:

- ▶ good food and nutrition
- ▶ avoiding smoking
- ▶ avoiding alcohol and other drug use
- ▶ adequate sleep
- ▶ sun safety
- ▶ immunisation
- ▶ cancer screening
- ▶ regular health checks
- ▶ social and community support, such as organised activities.

3A Show respect for diversity in communication

Always use your knowledge of diversity when communicating with a people with support needs, other staff members, other care professionals, family members or other people who visit.

Your understanding of other social and cultural groups affects:

- ▶ the way you speak
- ▶ the language you use
- ▶ the words you choose
- ▶ the body language you use
- ▶ the way you interact with other people
- ▶ what you think about another person's social or cultural background.

Different forms of communication

Communication is a very important element of your work, as you need to communicate with people with support needs, their families and friends, other staff in your workplace, volunteers and members of the general community, advocates, visitors and other care professionals.

There are many methods of communication. It is important to understand each method so that you can use the most appropriate one to provide the best care for people with support needs and communicate effectively with everyone you work with.

Here are the most common forms of communication.



Verbal communication

Verbal communication is what you say and hear; for example, when you talk with friends, ask directions or listen to instructions.



Written communication

Written communication is what you read and write; for example, when you take notes in class or read a train timetable. There is a lot of written communication when caring for people with support needs; for example, the care notes and reports that you write and the instructions you read.



Posters and signs

Posters and signs are also a form of written information, as are pictures, which are often used to provide warnings or give instructions.

3C Use effective strategies to communicate when a language barrier exists

A language barrier may exist when a person finds it difficult to explain things or understand what other people say due to their language skills. A language barrier may exist when two people don't speak the same language. Even if people do speak the same language, they may still have difficulty in understanding each other, as they may come from a different part of the country and speak a different dialect. They may also have left one country to live in another country and have forgotten their first language.

There are many strategies you can use to overcome a language barrier and help a person communicate. Knowing the strategies available can help you determine the best one to use. Bear in mind that you may have to try more than one strategy to successfully overcome a language barrier.



Multilingual signage



Multilingual signs are notices and posters that are written in more than one language. These are usually provided in the languages of the main cultural groups of the people with support needs at a particular care centre.

Some service providers do an audit or ask their local council for information about the commonly spoken languages in the local community. This allows them to tailor their information to make it useful for people who may use the service, and prevents money being wasted translating text into languages that are not required.

Imagery

Using imagery is a good way to help people communicate when a language barrier exists.

Create a book of pictures with words to suit the person's needs – family members may like to help. Together, you can choose words the person needs to be familiar with, such as medication, toilet, dining room, privacy and hairdresser. You can also buy picture dictionaries in English and other languages, which contain illustrations of a variety of words.

Ask your supervisor if you think a word or picture dictionary would be beneficial for the individuals you care for.

Summary

1. Communication is important in a care environment, as it affects nearly every task performed. It is important to show respect for diversity when communicating with a person with support needs, other staff members, other care professionals, family members or other people who come to visit.
2. There are several methods of communication. Always use the most appropriate method for the situation.
3. When communicating with people from diverse backgrounds and situations, you need to show empathy and understanding. Always be courteous and polite. Include everyone and use words that everyone can understand. If you watch and listen, you can learn a lot about what the other person is trying to say. Above all, be honest. If you have a problem understanding someone, speak to your supervisor.
4. You need to use both verbal and nonverbal communication to establish effective relationships. Understand how people are different. Often what is 'not said' carries more meaning than the words.
5. You also need to establish other people's confidence in you and build a mutual trust.
6. It is a good idea to regularly evaluate your communication skills to work out what you can improve.
7. There are many strategies you can use to overcome a language barrier if this is preventing you from communicating effectively. These include use of imagery, information in the person's first language or multilingual staff members.
8. Sometimes you will need to seek assistance from an interpreter. When choosing an interpreter you need to consider whether you need to use a person from the same culture or gender, and whether you need a language or a cultural interpreter.
9. Although a professional interpreter is always the best option, other people may be used if they are not available, for instance other staff members, volunteers, family members or friends.
10. Confidentiality is extremely important when using an interpreter. The *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) contains the laws and requirements for privacy and confidentiality in the care environment.
11. When working with an interpreter, realise that the conversation will take longer as everything needs to be said twice. Yes, using a professional interpreter costs money, but it is often the most appropriate and effective method of obtaining information.

4B Consider the impact of cultural differences if difficulties or misunderstandings occur

Social and cultural misunderstandings often affect the working relationship between care workers and other staff. They can also affect the relationship between care workers and people with support needs. As a result, the care received by the individual can suffer. This may be because people feel they may say the wrong thing and upset each other, or because they don't know how to approach the problem and they stop communicating.

Always check if the conflict is caused by a social or cultural difference, or by something else. Remember, conflict can occur if people from one social or culture group feel they aren't accepted because of the prejudices of other people. Misunderstandings can also occur when people don't understand other groups and cultures.

Consider the impact of social and cultural diversity

When you work with people from socially and culturally diverse backgrounds, conflict is often caused by a simple misunderstanding or misinterpretation of a situation. There are six patterns of difference that impact on all service delivery, as outlined in the following information.

Verbal communication styles

- ▶ Some words and phrases are used in different ways across cultures. For example, 'yes' can vary from 'maybe I'll consider it' to 'definitely yes'. This can affect your perception of the individual's consent. When they say 'yes', or seem to agree to a suggestion, they may not actually agree, but do not want to cause offence by disagreeing with you.

Nonverbal communication styles

- ▶ Nonverbal communication refers to facial expressions, gestures, seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. For example, avoidance of eye contact is a sign of great respect in some cultures, including many Indigenous Australian cultures. Some Australians regard this as a sign of hiding something.

Attitudes toward conflict

- ▶ Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others try to avoid it. For example, many Eastern countries deal with their conflict quietly. In this case, a written exchange might be a better way to resolve the conflict.

Approaches to completing tasks

- ▶ People from different cultures tend to complete tasks differently. Some are task-orientated, while others are relationship-orientated. For example, many Asian cultures tend to develop relationships at the beginning of a shared project and focus on task completion towards the end. On the other hand, Europeans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand and let relationships develop as they work.

A four-step approach

To resolve a misunderstanding or a difference, it usually helps to take a structured approach. Try these four steps.

Steps to resolving differences

1

Define the problem

Try to get a clear picture of what the problem is. Be aware that you may need to involve your supervisor if the situation is outside your level of authority. Do this as soon as possible, as some people with limited memory skills may forget what has occurred, or have trouble relaying the details to you.

It may be your responsibility to arrange for an interpreter or a family member to help communicate.

If the situation needs to be resolved immediately, remain calm. Meet with everyone and listen to what they have to say. Notify your supervisor or another staff member if you think you need help. Be aware that some individuals may react to difficult situations or misunderstandings with physical aggression; for example, hitting, kicking or biting. In their care plan there should be information that tells you about their trigger behaviours (what may cause this to happen) and how to respond.

2

Identify the cause

After you have defined the problem, you must clarify the issue that is causing the misunderstanding. You need to know why the situation is upsetting the other person. You may need to seek expert advice from someone who understands the culture or situation that has arisen.

The people involved in the difference should explain what the issue is for them and how they feel. It is important that no-one is rude to others. You must remain respectful towards the other people involved (and encourage others to do the same), even if you don't agree with everything that is said.

3

Suggest solutions

The person who is handling the situation – the care worker or supervisor – should then suggest a possible solution. More than one solution may need to be suggested, or a solution altered, so both parties involved in the conflict can decide on a solution that is the most appropriate.

4

Check the problem is resolved

The final step is to check that the problem has been resolved. Is the solution working? After a few days, talk to the people involved to see how they are going. If there is still a misunderstanding, you need to start the process again, beginning with Step 1.

Family members

Family can provide background information that may not be written on the individual's care plan. For example, a family member may tell you that many of the person's friends were killed in a conflict between two countries. The person may be very sensitive about any mention of the situation or jokes about the countries involved.

Ministers of religion/spiritual representatives

Religious and spiritual ministers have often known the person for many years and may be able to provide the guidance and support that you or your supervisor cannot.

Social workers/counsellors

It is often a good idea to use the services of people who are specially trained to resolve conflicts and can provide useful strategies to cope with a difficulty.

Australian Human Rights Commission

The Australian Human Rights Commission organisation people with problems at work. You can visit their website to read what the commission does.

Example

Address difficulties with appropriate people

Gerald is a middle-aged French man who lives at home with his aging mother. Gerald has an acquired brain injury as a result of excessive alcohol consumption over many years. He is prone to outbursts where he becomes verbally aggressive and has yelled at the English people who live next door a few times while his support worker, Tino, is present. Tino gathers that there has been a long-running cross-cultural feud in the neighbourhood.

Tino has worked with Gerald for many years, providing in-home respite care while his mother has a break and goes to her quilting group. Recently Tino has noticed that Gerald has started becoming more physical in his aggressive outbursts. Tino's extensive knowledge of his history and behaviour makes him wary, and he takes careful notice of the changes.

Tino observes Gerald punch a wall one day, then slam his fist onto a tabletop just near his own hand. One day, when Gerald is walking past Tino in the hallway, he pushes his shoulder into Tino's back as if he is trying to knock him over. He mumbles to himself about 'those noisy Poms next door', although Tino knows there is no-one living in the house next door at present, as the English people have recently moved out.

Tino notes this in his care notes, and contacts his supervisor straightaway and asks her to send another worker to support him until the end of the shift. He then asks his supervisor to organise a review of Gerald's care and support arrangements, as Tino feels that he can no longer safely manage Gerald's behaviour without intervention.

