



TIPS ON CULTURAL HUMILITY

- 1. Don't stereotype.** Stereotypes about people in poverty are common. We are primed to assume laziness, lack of motivation, poor judgment, and more. Recognize that your clients may be operating in a social context different from yours, and they are trying to make the best decisions they can considering the stressors they face. Don't assume that if the individual did not go far in school or is different from you in other ways that they are less intelligent or have less of a right to the remedy you would want. It sometimes helps to reverse roles in your own mind and think of yourself as the one in their situation. Most of our participants have been defined by our culture as having little to no value. Many of them are without adequate resources to take care of a family, own a home, or have standing in a community and may have been mistreated by the legal system. Our clients deserve credit for their perseverance.
- 2. Recognize the crisis of poverty and its effects.** People living in poverty are under chronic stress and constant scarcity that may impact decision-making. Short-term and urgent decisions may take precedence over long-term planning. Class markers like clothing and accessories are important symbols of social belonging and can be needed comforts in times of crisis. Norms in certain professional contexts – like precise timeliness, not interrupting, or prioritizing the written word – are not universal. Our clients carry the emotional and sometimes physical effects of long-term deprivation, such as lack of access to health care.
- 3. Know thyself.** Many lawyers think of ourselves as our professional selves only, but we are all shaped by our identities and experiences. Be aware of your own background and culture. Know that your religion, race, income level, age, ability, and gender impact how you see certain situations and how people may view and respond to you. Refrain from making judgments and be willing to consider another point of view. Examine your own motives and attitudes. Realize that your position as a professional could intimidate the client.
- 4. Listen Carefully!** Do not underestimate the benefit to your interviewee of truly listening. Listen deeply and focus on context. Everyone has limitations; some people's limitations inhibit effective communication. They may not speak English or English may not be their first language. Many clients will have experienced trauma or abuse that may affect the ways they communicate and may respond in a way you did not expect. Just as is true with individuals of financial means, they may come across as depressed, anxious, hostile, or evasive. Regardless of limitations or communication style, everyone deserves safety and stability. Try your best to understand the individual's worldview so that the problem can be placed in proper perspective.

5. Learn what you do not know. If you have an interviewee who is not providing you all of the information you want, try rephrasing your questions – and don't assume they are trying to deceive or hide with some bad intent. They may not understand what you are looking for. They may feel shy, ashamed, or afraid about answering. Be willing to ask a question several different ways.

6. R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Treat this person as you would any other client. Stand up and extend your hand to greet them. In addition:

a. Be aware of the image you present and what effect it may have on the confidence of the interviewee. People are used to seeing lawyers dressed in business fashion. They may be confused and feel you take them less seriously if you are not.

b. People communicate at different paces and in different styles. Allow your clients time to collect their thoughts and to tell their stories.

c. Do not assume that the individual is comfortable talking to you on a first name basis. When in doubt, call them Mr. or Ms. [Last Name], unless they tell you otherwise. When in doubt, ask (that is rarely disrespectful!).

d. Some cultures consider it a lack of respect to make eye contact with you while others may have an opposite view.

e. Openly encourage your client to ask questions.

7. Many interviewees are limited in their English/reading skills. In dealing with an individual with limited English proficiency, speak clearly, separate questions, take turns, be supportive if their English is not perfect, and avoid slang. In addition, avoid legal jargon or explain jargon used. When in doubt, summarize or paraphrase what you've been talking about to make sure the individual has understood you. Be aware that some people may not be able to read and may be willing to sign anything to avoid the embarrassment of revealing their inability. Finally, if your interviewee speaks a different language and you are having difficulties effectively communicating, please inform the AVLF attorney present.

8. Try to establish some rapport before "getting down to business." Although you will have limited time with the individual, balance your need to get information relatively quickly and the importance of making sure the interaction does not come off as too cold and business-like. Doing so will likely improve your ability to elicit better responses and it is an important aspect of showing respect and honoring the dignity of the individual. A respectful greeting and very brief small talk may be just enough to set the person at ease before diving right in.

9. Be sensitive when asking personal questions. Many of the questions you will need to ask are intensely personal in nature. Give the individual an explanation of why the question must be asked. Ask the question in a respectful manner and accept the answers as truthful unless there is clear evidence to the contrary.

10. Genuinely exhibit that you care. Express concern for the person's predicament. Exhibiting concern for the individual can be effective in furthering rapport and facilitating the unfolding of the person's story. Be careful that it is genuine: it is possible to be so concerned as to be patronizing.

11. Promise only the realistic. Be careful what you promise -- if anything at all. Many participants are unfamiliar with the legal system, and having a champion gives them their first real shot at access to justice. They will therefore take to heart your promises on any/every aspect of the representation and on any indication that they may prevail on a particular issue. **Additionally, under the Saturday Lawyer model, there is no guarantee that AVLf will decide or be able to place the individual's case for full representation.** That decision will be made following—and based upon— your interview with the individual. So promise carefully – and be mindful that all that can realistically be promised on Saturday is that the case will be reviewed for further representation if appropriate.