



# MESSAGING FOR AMERICAN INDIAN/ ALASKA NATIVE AUDIENCES

## Developing Inclusive Communications



The *Rx Awareness* campaign shares the real stories of individuals whose lives were impacted by prescription opioids. If you have the chance to share a personal story about opioids from a person who represents a tribal audience, remember that you are giving visibility to people who may carry a heavy burden tied to generational trauma and stereotypes. Take care to portray who they are and where they come from with accuracy. Kindly ask questions, listen, and be patient. If you make a mistake, acknowledge the mistake, apologize, and try to understand how to avoid such mistakes before moving on.

The following information can serve as a guide to communicating with American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) audiences and strengthening the relationship between your organization and the tribe you aim to reach.

### ESTABLISHING TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

- Consider first offering general invitations to speak, then remaining quiet and listening when conducting an interview. Let the person tell his or her story before questioning, and do not interrupt.
- Be genuine and share information about yourself to establish rapport (e.g., where you are from, general background about your family, or personal interests).
- Learn how the community refers to itself as a group of people (e.g., tribal name).
- Be honest and clear about your role and expectations.
- Invite people to educate you about specific cultural protocols in their community.
- Accept offers of food or drink if you are invited to someone's home, as it is a sign of respect.
- Always explain what you are writing if you are taking notes.
- Be willing to adapt to meet the needs of the community.
- Be open to allowing things to proceed without a specific structure, following the idea that "things happen when they are supposed to happen." Discussions that have a natural flow sometimes produce the most rewarding and authentic results.
- Show respect by being open to other ways of thinking, listening, and behaving.
- Listen and observe more than you speak. Be comfortable with silence or long pauses in conversations.
- Observe how community members engage with one another.
- Avoid jargon. Ensure that information, especially scientific information, is shared in a lay-friendly way to avoid misunderstanding.
- Respect confidentiality and the right of the tribe to control information and data.



# DEMONSTRATING UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Ensure that oral and written communications demonstrate:

- Awareness, acceptance, and valuing of cultural differences.
- Understanding of the different ways that people may interact with each other based on their cultures.
- Knowledge of the particular community served. This may be done by reaching out to culture bearers who may have that knowledge.
- Ability to adapt your communications to fit the cultural context of the individual, family, or community you aim to reach.

## LEARNING COMMUNICATION STYLES THAT AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE PEOPLE MAY USE

Recognize and understand that AI/AN people may use verbal and nonverbal communication approaches. Below is a description of how to interpret some of these approaches.

### Nonverbal Messages

- AI/AN people communicate a great deal through non-verbal gestures. Careful observation is necessary to avoid misinterpretation of non-verbal behavior.
- AI/AN people may lower their eyes to show respect or deference to Elders (see Key Terms below) or ignore an individual to show disagreement or displeasure.
- A gentle handshake is often seen as a sign of respect, not weakness.

### Indirect Communication

- It is often considered unacceptable for AI/AN people to criticize each other directly. It may be considered disloyal or disrespectful to speak negatively about another person; this may include describing a person's substance use patterns or behaviors.

### Humor

- AI/AN people may convey truths or difficult messages through humor and might cover great pain with smiles or jokes. It is important to listen closely to humorous responses, as it may be invasive to ask for too much direct clarification about sensitive topics.
- The use of humor and teasing to show affection or offer corrective advice is common.

### Storytelling

- Communicating by telling a story is common and sometimes in contrast with the "get to the point" frame of mind in Western society. If you need someone to repeat a statement for a sound bite, be direct in what you would like him or her to say and ask if they are comfortable with it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING RESPECTFULLY WITH AI/AN PEOPLE

- Avoid stereotyping based on looks, language, dress, and other outward appearances.
- Avoid intrusive questions early in the conversation.
- Do not interrupt others during conversation or interject during long pauses or silences.
- Do not stand too close to others and avoid speaking too loud or too fast.
- Be careful to not impose your personal values, morals, or beliefs.
- Be careful about telling stories of distant AI/AN relatives in your genealogy as an attempt to establish rapport unless you have maintained a connection with that AI/AN community.
- Avoid looking at your watch or the clock frequently and do not rush.
- If the people you are working with begin to cry, support them without asking further questions until they compose themselves and are ready to speak.
- Do not touch sacred items, such as regalia, instruments, ceremonial items, hair, jewelry, and other personal or cultural items.
- Always ask permission before you take pictures or record an interview.
- Always obtain written consent from the interviewee or tribal government to use information for personal presentations, case studies, or research.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT AI/AN AUDIENCES

**As you engage with and develop content for American Indian/Alaska Native audiences, avoid misrepresenting this audience. These are common misconceptions about AI/AN people:**

- The idea of all AI/AN people having a mystical spirituality is a broad generalization. This romantic stereotype that AI/AN people are spiritual and live in harmony with nature can be damaging and impairs your ability to provide services to AI/AN as real people.
- Due to tribal diversity, as well as hundreds of years of inter-tribal and inter-racial relationships, there is no single distinguishing “look” for AI/AN people. You cannot identify AI/AN people by how they look.
- There are a number of agencies that work with tribes. The U.S. Constitution, Executive Orders, and Presidential memos outline policy requiring that ALL executive departments bear the responsibility to consult with and respect tribal sovereignty. The misconception that the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service are the only agencies that work with tribes is not accurate.

## CAMPAIGN RESOURCES

As part of the CDC’s objective to improve health equity, the *Rx Awareness* campaign was expanded to reach tribal audiences. AI/AN resources including real stories, matte articles, advertisements, and postcards can be downloaded at CDC’s [campaign resource page](#) and used to raise awareness about the dangers of prescription opioids.

For more guidance on inclusive communication visit CDC’s [Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication](#) webpage.