

Welcoming People at Initial Contact

All encounters are therapeutic opportunities

When people seek our services, it is something to be celebrated. We need to ensure visitors feel welcomed, cared about and reassured from the moment they make contact. It is important to connect and engage with each person.

Some starting points:

- Make courtesy and respect more important than efficiency
- Begin with the intention of providing help, not just assessing need

Make a good first impression

A few welcoming habits can go a long way:

- Smile
- Make eye contact
- Shake hands when this is culturally appropriate
- Meet and greet people (everyone in the group) by name where possible and introduce yourself

Think about the way you dress for work. Our personal appearance shapes first impressions of the organization. Always dress in a way that is professional and tidy.

For tips about making phone calls welcoming, see the Phone Calls: Welcoming Tips and Scripts quick reference sheet.

Orient people to your services

Introduce the person to the service or program:

- Describe what you offer
- Explain what procedures to follow
- Clarify misconceptions
- Answer questions politely
- Take time to listen and respond to concerns

Always explain the next steps

Tell them, for example:

- What to bring to a first appointment
- What information they will be asked for
- When and how they will be assigned to a key worker

Communicate clearly and encourage questions

Effective communication with patients has been shown to improve medical outcomes and reduce rates of anxiety, pain and psychological distress. It also increases patient compliance and reduces symptoms.

There is often a mismatch between a health worker's level of communication and the client's level of understanding. For a variety of reasons, people seeking our services may have a limited ability to obtain, process and understand the basic health information they need to make good health decisions.

We need to adopt a patient-friendly approach by addressing their needs and encouraging questions:

- Consider the tone of your voice
- Speak slowly and use plain language
- Avoid jargon

To be on the safe side, we need to provide information that is easily understandable to everyone. Remember:

- You cannot tell by looking at someone if they have problems with literacy.
- You cannot rely on people to tell you they have problems with literacy.
- When people are seeking help, they may have higher levels of anxiety. This can significantly reduce the amount of information they can comprehend and retain.

Practice good listening skills

Try to make a person feel truly heard:

- Be pleasant and supportive and acknowledge the person as an individual.
- Try to be empathetic. Think about how you or one of your closest friends or family may feel in this situation.
- Use open and welcoming body language.

Reduce language barriers

If possible, collect information in the person's preferred language. Where appropriate, provide translations of documents or recruit an independent translator. Avoid using family translators unless it is an emergency.

Suggested activity

At your next staff gathering:

- Consider what your team's learning needs are around cultural competency
- Identify sources for Alberta Health Services translation services via phone, text or in-person
- Practice explaining next steps in your intake process at different levels of understanding