

speaking with clients who have low English proficiency

This tip sheet can help you communicate in English with clients whose own English language skills may be limited.

Key questions before you start

Wherever possible, find out as much as you can about the person with whom you will be speaking. The more you know, the better the information you can provide. Some key questions to ask include:

- What languages does the client speak, other than English?
- What is their ethnicity and cultural background?
- What is their experience with your service?
- How comfortable are they with communicating in English? Will this comfort level change with the length or complexity of the communication?
- Are they able to read in their preferred language, or in English?
- What issues will you be discussing?

Preparing for your communication

- Allow sufficient time for the communication, so that neither party feels rushed.
- Find out as much as you can about your client, including answers to the questions above.
- Be clear about what you want your client to understand at the end of the communication.
- Write down the main messages you wish to give and make sure you can explain them simply.
- Consider different ways to communicate your messages.
- If suitable, provide written materials in English, in the client's preferred language or both.

When you speak

Speak clearly

Many people are able to understand English when it is spoken clearly but become confused when the speaker talks too fast or slurs their words. Moderate your speech by practising the following techniques:

- Speak at a consistent and measured pace.
- Do not speak too softly or too loudly.
- Speak each word as a separate word; try not to run words into each other.
- Enunciate words clearly. Be sure to finish each word so that the tense of words is clear to the listener.
- Face your client when you speak. If you must walk away for any reason, stop speaking and do not resume until you are again facing your client.

Speak simply

The English language is full of inconsistencies, ambiguities and multiple meanings. Many terms that we use everyday can be confusing to people who are learning the language. Preparation and care are needed just to speak simply.

- Avoid acronyms (eg HACC, DHS) or explain them if you must use them.
- Do not use slang.
- Avoid technical or conceptual terms (eg 'respite care', 'intervention'). If you must use them, explain what they mean in a simple way.
- Make sentences short and clear. Communicate one idea per sentence.

Asking questions

- Try not to ask closed questions (questions that require only a 'yes' or a 'no' answer). Ask questions that require an answer in the form of a sentence. For example, 'Did you take your medicine today?' will not give you as much information as 'What medicines have you taken today?'
- Be mindful that a smile, a nod and a 'yes' or 'no' answer many not mean what you expect them to mean. Cultural practices can vary when it comes to answering direct questions: it may be seen as more polite or appropriate to seem agreeable than to give a negative response.

Checking for understanding

- Inform the client that they can ask you to clarify information and provide further explanations.
- Observe body language and expressions to gauge whether the client understands what you have said – be mindful, however, that body language can vary between cultures.
- Ask the client to repeat important points to check that they have understood the information. For example: "I want to be sure I have explained these exercises to you properly. Can you please show me what exercises you need to do each day? "
- Allow the client time to listen, think and respond, both to questions and to statements.

If the client requires the use of an interpreter, it is your responsibility to ensure that this service is provided. For tips on how to assess the need for an interpreter, arrange a qualified interpreter, and work with interpreters, refer to our Language Services tip sheets, available at www.ceh.org.au.