

Cultural Do's and Don'ts: Indian Elderly

- Be aware and sensitive to diversity issues within the Indian community. The values and beliefs of Indian elders are influenced by class, educational background, religious beliefs, and which geographical part of India they originated from.
- Nod or bow your head as a gesture of respect when initially meeting an Indian elder. It is not appropriate to touch or shake hands with an Indian woman, particularly a Muslim woman.
- Greet the eldest person first (generally male unless the eldest is female). Learning a few basic greetings in Indian can be very helpful in establishing rapport. *Namaste* (in Hindi); *As-salam Alaikum* (greeting for Muslims); *Sat Sri Akal* (greeting for Sikhs).
- It is more appropriate to address an elder by his/her surname (e.g., Mr. Patel, Mrs. Patel).
- Be aware that many elders, due to their religious beliefs, are strict vegetarians or do not eat particular types of meat. Many also do not smoke or drink for religious reasons.
- If the elder is quiet or nodding, do not assume he/she understands what is going on. Indian seniors tend to nod or say “yes” to be polite. Use a calm, lower tone of voice.
- Be patient, and never rush the elder. Direct eye contact is traditionally considered inappropriate or impolite although this is changing.
- Always get up from a seated position when an elder enters the room, and wait for him/her to sit down before sitting down. If there is only one chair, offer the chair.
- Keep your hands down at your sides or behind your back when talking with an Indian elder. Crossing one’s arms or pointing one’s fingers at them is considered extremely impolite.
- Remove your shoes at the entryway when visiting an Indian family’s home.
- It is important to dress respectfully when meeting with an elder. The manner in which you are dressed will strongly influence your credibility or how much trust you can build.
- Many elders will offer food to visitors because they enjoy the feeling of sharing. It may appear rude and they may feel offended if you decline the food. The elder may make you something as a gift as well. If there is a way to accept it, do so.
- Many Indian elderly feel they cannot say “no.” Therefore, do not “push” except when offering food. Food may need to be offered several times before being accepted due to the concept of sacrificing oneself. An elder will only accept food after being “pushed,” implying that they are only accepting because “you want them to,” not because it is their wish to do so.

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- Begin with “small talk” to establish rapport before shifting the attention to the issue at hand. It is considered disrespectful to get too personal with an elder by asking too many questions especially at first, but it is considered appropriate for them to ask questions or to be “blunt.”
- Indian elders often do not respond well to “receiving help.” A more effective approach is to start with “we have some information...” Help them gain as much control over a situation instead of “teaching” or “telling” them what to do. Try to make the interaction as interpersonal as possible, always putting yourself at the receiving end. If there is an interpreter, look at the elder while conversing and not the interpreter.
- Elders tend to be very private and prefer to “keep things within the house.” They may even feel a sense of shame when they need help and may put on “a different face” when talking with you to give you the idea that they and their family are “fine.” Ask respectfully several times whether they have any questions. Reiterate confidentiality.
- Follow up is extremely important. Indian elders will most likely not call you, even if they have questions or concerns, until they feel completely comfortable working with you.
- Be sensitive when discussing family matters with elders. Being critical of their children, or implying that their children are not taking good care of them will most likely turn the elder away, even when they are being mistreated or abused within the home.

Traditional Holidays

January 14	Pongal or Sankranti – This is a 3- day harvest festival and is one of the most joyful events in southern India.
March 17	Holi (Festival of Colors) – The most boisterous of Hindu festivals, Holi celebrates the end of cold weather and the onset of spring.
April 13	Baisakhi Considered the founding date of the Sikh religion and the Hindu solar New Year day.
August 15	Indian Independence Day
October 2	Mahatma Gandhi’s Birthday
October 5	Dussera One of the most popular Hindu festivals, Dussera represents the triumph of good over evil.
October	Diwali (Festival of Lights) – This is a Hindu New Year festival celebrated by everyone in India. The date varies according to the lunar calendar.
December 25	Christmas Christian Indians celebrate this holiday.
Date varies	Id The end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, is celebrated two times per year. The date depends on the lunar calendar. The second Id commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham.