

Cultural Do's and Don'ts: Japanese Elderly

- Dignity is essential when addressing Japanese elders. For example, it is considered very rude to chew gum when addressing an elder. Expressing respect to the elder cannot be overemphasized in interacting with Japanese senior citizens.
- Investigate and probe for the degree of assimilation and acculturation of the client and his/her family members. Be aware that many Japanese American clients were born and raised in American society and only speak English; therefore, they might be offended if the service provider treats them as foreign-born Asians. For example, many Japanese Americans are sensitive about distinguishing themselves from Japanese nationals because of their experience being incarcerated in American concentration camps during World War II.
- Also identify feelings and attitudes toward aging. For a second or third generation American-born elder, feelings may differ greatly from someone born and raised in Japan.
- Identify the person who makes the decisions for the family.
- For some Japanese elders, questions they might want to ask are considered impolite. Be persistent when asking, "Do you have any questions?"
- Identify the client's perception of receiving help. For example, does he/she (particularly Japanese males) feel embarrassed or ashamed about receiving help from someone outside of the immediate family? Do they feel comfortable with younger/older service providers?
- Let the client know they can say "no." Nodding of the head up and down, smiling, and saying "yes" could mean they understood you or they may just be trying to be polite.
- It is very common among Japanese elders to avoid direct eye contact. Do not assume that he/she is resisting services, counseling, or any type of assistance. Direct eye contact may be considered aggressive, so it might help to sit next to the client and look at something (brochure, handout, notes, etc.) together.
- Withholding emotions is a tradition practiced to put other people's needs before one's own. Try to observe this type of behavior and be aware that the client may be suppressing his/her own pain or discomfort.
- *Enryo* is the Japanese trait of being reserved. The elderly often defer from being aggressive and assertive, believing that boldness is not positive. Practicing *enryo* does not mean the client is aloof, unemotional, uninvolved.
- Be sensitive about religious beliefs. Knowing the client's religion may help you better understand how they deal with tragedies in their lives, such as illness and death.

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- Hospitality is an important cultural value. During home visits, it is likely that refreshments and/or food will be served. Service providers with strict rules on accepting gifts from clients may have to reconsider their policies for the sake of establishing rapport.
- Direct physical contact--hugging, kissing, and holding hands between opposite sexes--is not common practice among the elderly. Therefore, shaking hands is more acceptable unless the client physically reaches out to you.
- It is most appropriate to greet the eldest male first, unless specified, when visiting/meeting with family members.
- Double negative questions should be avoided when speaking to Japanese-speaking elders. They are not familiar with this style of grammar and may easily get confused. You may get incorrect answers. For example, if someone asks, "You don't want this?" an American will answer, "No," meaning, "No, I do not want this." However, a Japanese will answer, "Yes," meaning, "Yes, I do not want this."

Traditional Holidays

January 1	"Oshōgatsu" (New Year) - The day on which the birth of the New Year is celebrated with special house cleanings, meetings of the entire family, and serving of special foods.
March 3	"Hina Matsuri" (Festival of the Dolls) - This day expresses the hope that girls will have future happiness.
May 5	"Tango No Sekku" (Boy's Festival) a.k.a. "Kodomo-No-Hi" (Children's Day) - This celebration brings wishes for children in the family to grow up healthy and strong.
Mid-August	"Obon" (Festival of Souls) - This festival is celebrated throughout Los Angeles Japanese American communities. A variety of foods is offered to the spirits of ancestors, and their repose is prayed for. Traditional dances are performed. The largest Obon is in Little Tokyo.
December 25	Christmas - Widely observed throughout Japanese American communities. In Japan, Christmas is often a date night. Families with children celebrate Christmas with a "decoration cake."