

Learning From My Clients

by Jose A. Cruz, MSW

How do you effectively reach a complex community comprised of individuals belonging to a vast number of groups and subgroups? What can make treatment and intervention more effective? Clearly, as health providers, we resolve to notify prospective clients about vital services, ensure satisfaction to our current patients, and encourage an unremitting and positive change in the population we assist. In order to do this, we must provide services not dictated by static guidelines or inadequate and limited trainings focused on soaking up general population descriptions. After all, to care for human beings who are brilliantly complex and differ on an endless list of factors, only an open, lifelong, and ever-changing approach will do. That is why it is an exhilarating challenge for me to reach out to the diverse communities across New Jersey.

It is almost impossible to claim expertise on all the overt characteristics and qualities that groups possess, not to mention all the subtle nuances. In my case, these would be the tools needed to assess new clients and understand how smoking's role is perceived within their respective cultures, as well as within their individual lives, which are each uniquely defined by geography, socioeconomic status, community, etc. This is undoubtedly important when dealing with the introduction of nicotine and cessation medications, discussion of behavioral change, or evaluation of treatment adherence. Take for example, how nicotine gum can be viewed as socially disrespectful and therefore unappealing by one Latino individual but perfectly acceptable by another. How can this inconsistency exist? Easily, when one considers how age or specific country of origin shape individuals' attitudes. Furthermore, knowledge of how long a person has lived in the United States can be the key to understand this disparity.

One could take this issue as commonsensical: each client is different - mystery solved. However, the importance of respect as defined by a Latino family or community is a common thread among the members of this "umbrella" term. The significance of respect, stigma, and even paradigms are implicit and shaped by these units, so certain personal factors may shape different views, while central beliefs remain similar. The same goes for assuming that membership of a certain group ensures a connection with a community sharing certain characteristics. This is evident in emergent marketing to different Latino groups; however, messages designed specifically for individuals from one Latin American country may not influence a person from another. For example, anti-tobacco images using soccer motifs may resound for some part of the Mexican community while it may not be as popular for many individuals from the Dominican Republic. These details may seem insignificant, but they are essential in


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forming successful ties with clients. Clearly, this approach not only benefits the interactions I have with the diverse community I work in, but also broadens my sense of what it actually means to identify with various groups.

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Proyecto Vida: Latino Deje de Fumar has developed language and culturally sensitive services to help members of the Hispanic community quit smoking. The program kicked off in January of 2006 and the response from the Hispanic community has been overwhelming.

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