

HOW TO USE INTERPRETERS EFFECTIVELY

TIPS FOR BEST PRACTICES

Interpreting is a profession that requires skill. A person that is bilingual is not automatically equipped for interpreting. Research has demonstrated that the use of professional, trained interpreters increases client outcomes and satisfaction of services for all parties involved. Research also points to the need for practitioners to be trained on how to effectively work with interpreters.

As much as possible, practitioners should use formally trained interpreters. A well trained interpreter should have learned the guidelines for effective interpreting. However, there will most likely be situations when the use of a professional interpreter is not an option. It is also the practitioner's responsibility to be educated on how to successfully work with interpreters. The following guidelines will help you make better use of the individual's language skill.

PRIOR TO YOUR SESSION

Develop a pool of accessible and trained interpreters for the most common languages spoke in your area of service delivery¹.

Develop and maintain good working relationships with interpreters.

Establishing a co-worker alliance with the interpreter is very beneficial.

Outline the focus of the session with the interpreter, as well as orienting them to the organization's mission, goals, structure, terminology and roles.

Prepare them for any specific expectations you might have of them during the session².

Clarify the expectation of confidentiality during the session.

Make sure a sufficient amount of time is scheduled for briefing and debriefing interpreters, as well as allowing a little extra time during the session.

Explain the need for literal, word for word translation during the session.

Clarify time and fee for service.

DURING THE SESSION

Introduce yourself to the interpreter and repeat any specific instructions.

Repeat the need for a literal interpretation of the session. For example, if the client asks a question, the interpreter should repeat the question to you, not try to answer the question themselves?

After introducing yourself, allow the interpreter to introduce themselves as well. Interpreters should include commitment to confidentiality in their introduction.

When greeting your client(s), talk to them directly. Always direct speech to the client, not to the interpreter. (for example, do not say "ask her if she ate this morning", instead,

while looking at client say, “have you eaten this morning?”)3

Although the client will not understand what you are saying, your body language and tone of voice can convey that you care and can help establish the bond and trust necessary for successful Interaction.

Maintain good eye contact with the client and pay attention to your nonverbal communication especially when you are not speaking but interpreter is conveying your message.

Expect the interpreter to assist with clarification and encourage them to stop you at any time if they are having difficulty or need to clarify.

Speak in short, direct sentences and then await interpretation. Stick to one topic at a time.

Do not use the interpreter to frame your questions. You should also observe the interpreter to ensure they are not responding for the client.

Observe the client’s body language as the interpreter speaks to ensure that it is consistent with your message.

Avoid appearing rushed and give the client opportunities to ask questions.

Prepare to repeat yourself in different words.

Speak at a moderate pace and pause frequently to check on client’s understanding.

Avoid slang, professional jargon, and idioms. Many concepts in our language have no equivalency in other languages. Be prepared to break concepts down into basic language.

Check to see if messages are understood (you may ask the interpreter to repeat things such as instructions or directions back to you in English)?

Ask the interpreter to interpret everything the clients says.

Give the interpreter time to interpret concepts. One word can require a lengthy explanation in either direction if the concept does not exist in the other language.

Avoid side conversations with the interpreter in the presence of your client. If you need to address the interpreter, inform the client about it first.

Do not talk about clients in their presence. Remember that many clients will have basic knowledge of English.

AFTER THE SESSION

Debrief on communication problems with the interpreter.

Debrief on emotional and trauma-related issues (if necessary). In mental health settings or other settings where sensitive material arises, supervision for interpreters is essential.

OTHER TIPS

If sessions are ongoing, try to use the same interpreter each time.

Do not use family members and children to interpret for anything other than general communication like meeting times, dates, explanation of rules, roles, etc.

Understand the difference between interpretation and cultural brokering and use each intentionally. You may use the interpreter as a cultural broker only after you clarify your expectation with the interpreter. Specify when and on what subjects you want the interpreter to act as a cultural broker. For example, actually say "Please step out of the interpreter role for a moment and tell me what you think _____ means?"

Be aware of cultural differences. Educate yourself on the culture of your clients, also remembering that broad generalizations are unhelpful and each client is unique and interprets their culture differently. Just because an interpreter says they speak a language does not mean that they know the culture of a given client.

Advocate within your agency for the use of formally trained interpreters.

Make sure money is set aside in the budget specifically for interpreter services. Hire in-house Interpreters. Make sure bilingual employees are trained in interpreting if used for this role.

LEGAL PROVISIONS:

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires that any agency that receives federal funding provides language access to Limited English proficient (LEP) clients, in order to not discriminate on the base of national origin. The Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights recognizes the use of professional interpreters and bilingual staff as an effective method of communication, and considers the use of family members and friends as an inappropriate method⁴.

1 The Center for Victims of Torture. (2005). "Guidelines for providers working with interpreters" in Healing the hurt: A guide for developing services for torture survivors. Minneapolis, MN: The Center for Victims of Torture.

2 Susan Rhema, MSW, LCSW. Personal communication. 6 February 2008. Developed for KOR Educator's Manual.

3 Catholic Charities of Louisville, Inc. "How to work effectively with an interpreter". Retrieved from <http://ccmrsky.org/index.php/interpreter-services/interpretation/how-to-work-effectively-with-an-interpreter/>

4 Catholic Charities of Louisville, Inc. "Legal Provisions". Retrieved from <http://ccmrsky.org/index.php/interpreter-services/legal-provisions/>

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