

Cultural Sensitivity

In Somali culture, honour determines much of a person's behaviour, mode of dress, education, and economic activity, and it influences gender dynamics and social interaction in general.

Gender roles are strictly defined: the Somali man is the head of the family and he is responsible for everything external that affects the family, while the Somali woman's responsibilities are focused on internal matters, such as child bearing and rearing.



Loyalty, generosity, and interdependence of the community members are important and expected from every member.

Respect is important in Somali culture, particularly respect for elders. The younger generations demonstrate respect for their elders by seeking their advice and providing for their care.

Somalis do not consider it disrespectful to be late for a meeting or appointment. Contrary to some other African cultures, Somalis are not perceived of as being shy when it comes to accessing services or asking for help from medical or other professionals.

Female genital mutilation, often referred to as female circumcision, is a ritual practiced in Somalia that affects 90% of Somali women. It is believed to thwart sexual appetite, protect a woman's virginity, and enhance her appeal as a marital partner. Many consider the scar aesthetically attractive. The majority of Somalis regards this procedure as a religious obligation that affects the family's honour and wealth. A woman who has not been circumcised is considered morally irresponsible and generates less wealth for the family when she marries. The most common type of female genital cutting practiced in Somalia is Type III (80%), referred to as Infibulations or Pharaonic circumcision, which is an invasive procedure. The less radical procedure, Type I, is commonly referred to as clitoridectomy and Sunna.

Please keep in mind that Somali women who have not been circumcised experience a great deal of cultural and religious pressures to submit to such a procedure, even in Canada.

Immigration Experience

Most Somalis have left their country because of the civil war that has been taking place in Somalia for more than 20 years.

Some Somalis indicate that fear of the cultural practice of female genital mutilation for themselves or a close family member is the main reason for them to emigrate. In a landmark ruling, Canada granted refugee status to a Somali woman who fled her country with her 10-year-old daughter because she feared that her daughter would face ritual genital mutilation. Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board stated the daughter's "right to personal security would be grossly infringed upon" if she was forced to return.

Somalis also experience culture shock due to a difficulty adjusting to Canadian life: the fast and time-focused daily routine, the formalized processes for business, finance, health, and government. Canada is usually not the first country of settlement for Somalis - they often come from other countries or refugee camps in third party countries.

Impact of Immigration on Health

Somali patients frequently express a sense of loneliness and might demonstrate other symptoms related to post traumatic stress, such as hypertension.



Feeling
isolated

mistrusting their
personal environment

Psychological Stressors:

- Separation from family
- Receiving news of conflict and insecurity in their home country
- Culture shock due to a difficulty adjusting to Canadian life: the fast and time-focused daily routine, the formalized processes for business, finance, health, and government.

*** In order to eliminate the language barrier it is advisable to let non-(or limited-) English speaking patients know about the availability of a professional and confidential interpretation service.**

Why was this infographic made?

This infographic is a response to concerns expressed by health care professionals in London regarding the lack of knowledge and understanding of health care practices of different immigrant groups. We hope that this information will provide health care professionals with an increased awareness of the factors which may affect how members of a different cultural group access and respond to health care services in our community.

Communication

The Somali communication style is expressive through the tone of voice, its volume, and the use of body language (arm and hand gestures). A friendly conversation between Somalis may sound like a heated argument to a Western person.

When building rapport with a Somali patient, keep in mind that because of the cultural focus on upholding the family's reputation, it is considered socially appropriate to boast and openly show pride.

Social interaction between Somali men and women only takes place within families. Even in professional environments, gender dynamics are limited to protect family honour. It is considered highly inappropriate if a man speaks directly to a woman.

In Somali culture men and women never make eye contact, shake hands or speak directly to one another, except in family settings. Between two men, eye contact is acceptable as long as it is not prolonged - it is considered best to only occasionally look someone in the eyes.

* ***It may be considered inappropriate to initiate conversation with a female patient, unless it takes place in a public setting or with a family member.***

* ***Calling people by their first names is not considered polite, even among 'equals'.***

* ***It is advisable to assign a female health care professional to a female Somali patient, when possible. If not, please ensure a female staff member or family member is invited into the room.***

Languages

- Somali is the official language
- Secondary languages:
 - Arabic
 - English
 - Italian

Ululation, a high pitched shrilling prayer, is an important ritual used to celebrate milestones in life.

Family

The family is the most important support system for Somalis. Family refers to extended family and other people connected, although not necessarily blood-related.

Most Somali families living in London hold on to the traditional concept of family life. The family is considered a responsible unit vested with power to make decisions for all of its members.



It is important to provide medical and emotional support for the wife. Education about fertility treatment options should be approached with care as the couple might have difficulty accepting a diagnosis of infertility for the husband.

Marriage is considered a family covenant and it is most likely arranged by the fathers of the two families. It is considered an abomination to break such a covenant, thus divorce rates are very low.

There is great pressure for couples to start a family. If for some reason, a couple has difficulty conceiving, it is considered a curse and with emphasis on family honour, it can be challenging for a health care professional to provide medical support. Generally, the woman is blamed for the infertility of the couple.

* ***Since Somalis consider sexual activity before marriage unacceptable, instead of prescribing daily-dose contraceptives for unmarried Somali women, it is advisable to consider alternatives, such as single dose injections.***

An important aspect of child bearing is the value of having a son. Women will worry for the whole pregnancy and will pray for a boy during delivery.

A woman might have greater power as a daughter or sister than as a wife or daughter-in-law. In her parental family, a Somali woman always remains a daughter and a sister. In general, a father and/or brother will sacrifice everything to help his daughter or sister in need.

Traditionally, there is a dependence on family structure for the well being of each member, especially elders. From the parents' perspective, children are an insurance policy for their old age. Family members feel responsible for the care of parents and elders and sending them to a nursing home is stigmatizing.

* ***If external care for a Somali senior is required, encourage family participation in the decision making process and expect some resistance.***

Religion & Spirituality

Islam is the state religion in Somalia and the majority of Somalis is Sunni Muslims (90%) with a Christian minority, which is mostly Roman Catholic. Religion governs much of the Somali Muslims' personal, political, economic and legal activities. One of the religious obligations for Muslims is to pray five times a day.

* ***Somali patients might appreciate to be offered a quiet space at the healthcare provider's facility where they could pray while waiting for an appointment.***

Fatalism is an important phenomenon. A patient may believe that the illness they have is the will of God as punishment for not adhering to the principles of the religion. Good or bad health and wealth are considered part of a person's destiny. This belief system has an impact on people's attitudes toward treatment for treatment plans or health promotion programs.

Religion and diet are closely linked for Somalis. Muslims eat Halal foods only and the consumption of pork and alcohol is forbidden. Besides oily food, carbohydrates such as rice, bread and sugar are highly consumed.

* ***Consider religious dietary restrictions for hospital food menus and for Muslims needing health corrective diets.***

* ***For Muslims needing prescriptions, alcohol based medicine should not be considered if alternatives are available, If no alternative is available, the patient***

* ***Acknowledging faith practices within a medical treatment plan will increase the emotional buy-in of the patient, especially when invasive medical procedures are being considered.***

Alternative Treatments

Alternative treatments are widely used. Spiritual practices for health issues are very important. Many Somalis believe that a disease is a spirit that can be outcasted if they have enough faith. A health care professional might observe a Muslim Somali patient saying a prayer when they are receiving a treatment plan. The intent of the prayer is to allow for Allah to decide on the effectiveness of the medicine.

Religion might also advise the patient how to prevent certain diseases. The precepts of Islam strongly emphasize personal hygiene.

Some spiritual treatments might include spiritual healers using religious rituals and herbal medicines.

Try to avoid booking appointments on **Friday**, the Muslim holy day.

