



**DO'S and DON'TS when working with  
Immigrants from Former Soviet Union.  
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Every immigrant population brings with it unique cultural and psychological dynamics that affect how smoothly the immigrants will resettle. For a variety of reasons related to pre-and post-migration factors, immigrants and refugees experience a high rate of mental health problems. The development of culturally-sensitive approaches and early detection of these problems among refugees arriving in the US benefits those individuals, the agencies that sponsor them, and the communities that absorb them. The following list of suggestions may help you to work with those of your clients who come from the Former Soviet Union in their process of integrating their old and new lives in a manageable way.

**DON'TS**

- DON'T assume that all clients who speak Russian belong to the same culture. All people who come from the Former Soviet Union are Russian-speaking; however, they come from the countries that made up the portions of the Former Soviet Union and represent a very diverse population with different social, cultural and political backgrounds.
- DON'T think that speaking a client's language ensures cultural competence. For example, people from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkistan are closer to Central Asian cultures while people from Russia, Ukraine, and Latvia are more European in nature.
- DON'T underestimate the importance of the issue of confidentiality. Many immigrants and refugees who experienced certain types of trauma may have a tremendous fear associated with being "interviewed". Highly structured questionnaires are generally inappropriate for this group of people; therefore, the workers should be instructed to use a more flexible, open-ended interview format.



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- DON'T assume that when you have a culturally competent staff with a similar background to the client, you are meeting the needs of your client in the best way. A common practice in many clinics is to use staff with similar backgrounds as the population they serve. However, such practices are not always meeting the needs of the individuals because privacy and confidentiality are so important to this population, they will often request a staff member who is in no way connected to their community.

### DO'S

In spite of social, cultural and geographic diversity, several characteristics with broad generalization can be seen as common characteristics of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union.

- DO consider the traumatic environment from which this population came from. Characteristics of this environment have included oppression of various cultural and ethnic groups, chronic deprivation of human rights, and oppression of religious freedom. To more fully address the past trauma, mental health services should be integrated into refugee resettlement programs.
- Do realize that public agencies, which are associated with the government might not be perceived as trustworthy by persons from the Former Soviet Union.
- Do recognize that you may be perceived as an authoritarian figure to be mistrusted and manipulated. For soviet families, financial and emotional dependence on one another was a matter of survival. The world was divided into those who can be trusted and those who cannot be trusted. Splitting was a form of adaptive functioning in the Former Soviet Union.
- DO protect the confidentiality of your clients and inform them about it. For your clients, confidentiality is often a new idea. Some of their histories are filled with broken trust. In any survey the information shared by the respondent should be associated only with categories of



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- experiences rather than with individuals. Another way confidentiality can be protected is by using workers and translators who are not from local immigrant or refugee communities.
- Be aware that the stigma attached to mental health services is very strong for the “Russian” population. Members of this cultural group tend to delay seeking mental health treatment. They use these services only as the last resort, prolonging unnecessary suffering.
  - Do recognize the importance for service providers to develop trust and build relationships through active outreach to the community.
  - Do provide psycho-education about mental health services. The mental health system was different in the Former Soviet Union.
  - Do realize that families experience varying degrees of generation dissonance due to immigration. A great deal of stress occurs in family relations partially influenced by the American cultural emphasis on individualism rather than on family unity. In many immigrant families three generations lived under the same roof before their arrival to the U.S. Young people generally adjust faster and support new values that give them greater freedom, which their parents may resist.
  - Do realize when working with seniors that the level of respect given to adults and particularly the elderly is different in American culture, which tends to idolize youth. Of all the immigrants from the Former Soviet Union seniors are especially at risk for social isolation. They are less likely to speak English, they become dependant on their adult children who often work full time and are not available. This change in power dynamics can be detrimental, eroding respect children typically have for their parents.