Primer on Working with Muslim Students, Faculty Members, and Clients

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Abstract

As growing Muslim students and Muslim communities across the United States, it is necessary that educators and health care providers overcome the lack of familiarity with Islam to ensure non-discrimination toward Muslims’ beliefs. This presentation highlights practical solutions for Muslims’ concerns and needs that administrators should consider. Many accommodations of the basic needs of Muslim students, faculty and clients are manageable and can be easily made by sensitive and considerate administrators and via cultural education.

Below are helpful findings and recommendations to accommodate Muslim students, faculty, and clients for a win-win situation, while avoiding violations of Muslim Civil Rights.
Islam is a monotheistic, Abrahamic religion. A follower of Islam is called a Muslim. Muslims (1.2 billion worldwide) believe that there is only one God (Allah in Arabic). Islam means “surrender”, and it is the second largest religion and the fastest growing religion in the U.S. (Ali et al., 2004; Curtis, 2009).
Muslim Americans (*n* = 6-8 millions) face rising religious discrimination in schools, workplaces (25%) and communities across the country (U.S. State Department, 2001). According to annual opinion surveys conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the percentage of survey participants claiming an “unfavorable” view of Muslims rose from 29% in 2002 to 35% in 2007. Also, a 2009 Pew Forum showed that 58% of survey participants believed that Muslims are subject to “a lot of discrimination,” far more than said the same of Jews (35%), evangelical Christians (27%), or Mormons (24%).

Amer (2005) studied the mental health experiences of 611 Arab Americans from 35 U.S. states post September 11. Participants reported significantly higher anxiety and depression compared to normative samples and studies with other ethnic minority groups.

Among American youth, Muslim youth were significantly more religious than their non Muslim counterparts (*n* = 35) in the study (Ahmed, 2004). Muslim students usually face challenges to adhere to the practices of their religion in the U.S. Almost of their practices (prayer, fasting, modest dress for females, and non-consumption of alcohol and pork are visible to the public (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006).
Methods: 26 Muslim, male students participated in this informal study. They were asked to respond to 6-item survey about their concerns as Muslims before coming to study in the U.S (Figures 1-6): how did they find their school environment; what things should be available/provided by school; what do they think about their school’s health center in terms of personal health; do they have safety issues in the U.S, and things that teachers, students and others should know about them?
Results (Fig 1-6) and Overall Findings (Fig 7) revealed that Muslim students are mostly concerned about stereotyping and profiling Muslims at airport and schools. This may be due to lack of education and awareness about the true, great teaching of Islam. Responders would appreciate school/employer understanding of their need for a designated prayer room/area for their daily prayer. Their faculty and employers should allow them time (around noon and late afternoon) to pray while at school or work. Another major concerns are availability of Halal food (no pork and no alcohol) and acknowledging their Holidays. Based on students’ responses, they would prefer to go to a university or work at an institution where there is an Islamic Center in the same city/town. A large percentage of students (40%) reported that they are happy at their school and the personal health at schools.
10 Tenets Rules

1. Encouraging tolerance & respect of the Islamic Religion.
2. Designated a common area for prayer.
3. Allowing 5-10 min when it is time for the prayers.
4. Allowing 1 ½ for the Friday prayer around noon.
5. Providing extended food options in Dining Halls.
6. Academic Calendar: scheduling around important Muslim holidays.
7. Including Islamic education information during Residence Hall Orientation. Don’t accept information about Islam from unqualified sources.
8. Respecting female students and faculty choice of wearing the “Hijab,” it is part of their faith. People should not assume that Muslim women who wear the hijab are being controlled by men.
10. Changing Prejudice: Don’t demonize my their faith, Don’t reflect what you think is best for them.
Special Considerations for Muslim Clients/Patients

- It is ok to be curious! It is also ok to ask and get informed.
- Recognizing appropriate behavior and specific practical knowledge, e.g. nutrition, religion, and attitudes towards patient-doctor relationship.
- Understand their dietary restrictions: avoid offering food with pork and alcohol (Jones et al, 2011).
- Be gender-sensitive: no hugging or touching between men and women.
- Muslim women prefers to be examined by a female healthcare provider.
You are violating the First Amendment of the Constitution, if you would single Muslims out.

Remember that they are your students, colleagues, and clients who are helping this country similar to or even more than you. Also remember that you do not know what’s best for them more than they do!

Being sensitive to Muslim’s needs and treating them with justice and equality will serve several purposes to: (1) act with civility, (2) honor the founding principles of this nation to welcome all to live and worship in safety and freedom, and (3) allow Muslims to work with you toward the common good of this country while enjoying the same freedoms/opportunities that everybody else has.
References


Nasir, N. S., and Al-Amin, J. “Creating Identity-Safe Spaces on College Campuses for Muslim Students.” *Change, 2006, 22*-27.