

## Should I shake your hand?

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[by Shahnaz Ashraf](#)

“Should I shake your hand?” From a cultural point of view, I get asked this question more than any other during my day both at work and socially. With the question often comes some awkward eye contact, hand movements and a nervous laugh as my male conversational partner tries to work out whether he should shake my hand or not.

His simple greeting gesture then brings into question my own faith and cultural beliefs.

On one hand I have my cultural and religious upbringing from home as my parents are Pakistani Muslims and I have always embraced my roots but on the other hand I consider myself a British Muslim as I have lived my entire life in England which has its own culture.

Being of Pakistani heritage and a Muslim woman some would say it is not appropriate for me to shake hands with men but as an English person (or ‘Asian British’ on ethnicity questions) it would be rude to turn down someone’s hand once it is offered forward. I respect both cultures and my personal view is that I will always shake someone’s hand if it is offered to me whether they are male or female.

So, allow me introduce myself whilst shaking your hand. My name is Shahnaz and I am a Speech and Language Therapist. I run Total Communication jointly with my business partner Alison Matthews.

Returning to the question ‘in hand’, I feel there is no right or wrong answer and it is a matter of personal preference for the two people greeting each other at the time. My opinion is that if you wish to offer your hand because this is your ‘norm’ then do so but don’t be offended if the woman does not accept but greets you verbally instead. Also if you didn’t offer me your hand I would not be offended either.

Raising these questions allows us to gain an understanding and awareness of other people cultures and beliefs and this is what makes us a tolerant society.

The North West of England, specifically Manchester where I live, is such a diverse and culturally rich city. There are over 7 million residents in this area. Of these, Asian British / Pakistani which is also my personal background are in high numbers here. As this group of people have a large population in the northwest, it would be reasonable to state that having information and knowledge about this community, its culture and belief systems is crucial to understanding the needs of both the people with Learning Disabilities and those who support or care for them. I believe this information would help achieve a more person





centred service by enabling us to understand what is important and relevant to families from this community. Everyone including those with a learning or physical disability whatever their back ground should have the same human rights, choice, access to health and social care and be supported to live independently as the rest of the population.

As a Speech and Language Therapist, I believe helping people communicate in any way they can is a basic human right and the foundation of anything we do. To communicate effectively we need to have some understanding of what is important to the person we are working with. What are their customs, beliefs, social behaviour, language and what is socially acceptable to them in essence it helps to know about their culture so we can engage and involve them in their care and decision making. Through Total Communication Services CIC we are always trying to raise cultural awareness to help service users, their families and carers from ethnic minorities and the general public. We aim to help with understanding the importance of being culturally sensitive to others and ensuring the needs of service users are met by staff who are inclusive and aware of some of the cultural issues that could affect the way a person engages with them.

I have found over the years people often want to ask questions and learn but are unsure if it appropriate to ask. Equally I've found that like me most people from different cultures are happy to answer questions based around their own personal experiences.

Thank you for taking the time to read my blog, I can be contacted on [shahnaz@totalcommunication.org](mailto:shahnaz@totalcommunication.org).