

SPECIFIC DISABILITIES

Mobility Impairments

A person in a wheelchair is a “wheelchair user” or “uses a wheelchair.” When speaking with someone using a wheelchair or scooter, try sitting or crouching down to his/her approximate height. Never lean on a person’s wheelchair unless you have permission – it’s the person’s private space. Give a push only when asked. Enable people who use crutches, canes, walkers or wheelchairs to keep them within reach, unless requested otherwise.

Be aware of what is and is not accessible to people who use mobility aids such as wheelchairs and walkers.

Visual Impairments

Be descriptive. You may have to help orient people with visual impairments and let them know what’s coming up. If they are walking, tell them if they have to step up or step down; let them know if the door is to their right or left, and, warn them of possible hazards. Be the assistant, not the director. If you are asked for assistance, let a person who has a visual impairment hold your arm to guide them.

You don’t have to speak loudly to people with visual impairments. Most people who are visually impaired can hear just fine. Offer to read written information for a person with a visual impairment if appropriate.

Speech Impairments

Listen patiently and carefully, speak in a normal tone of voice. Don’t complete sentences for the person unless they look to you for help. Don’t pretend you understand what a person with a speech impairment says just to be polite. Ask the person to repeat if you don’t understand. Ask the person to write down a word if you’re not sure what they are saying.

Hearing Disabilities

Face people who are Deaf or hard of hearing when you talk. Slow your rate of speech, speak your words clearly, and increase the level of your voice, if requested. Use short, simple sentences and avoid chewing gum. If an individual uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.

Not all people who are Deaf or hard of hearing can read lips. Communicate in writing or use gestures, if appropriate. If you need to attract the attention of a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing, touch him/her lightly on the shoulder.

Cognitive Disabilities

Don’t assume the person is not listening just because you are getting no verbal or visual feedback. Ask them whether they understand or agree. Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing. Provide extra time for decision-making. Be patient, flexible and supportive. Speak in clear, short sentences and be respectful. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.

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A Guide to Respectful Communication

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GENERAL ETIQUETTE

People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. “People First Language” is a respectful way to speak about people with disabilities by emphasizing the person first rather than the disability. You would say “a person who is blind” rather than “a blind person.” The term “handicapped” should be avoided as there are negative connotations associated with this word.

Language is powerful, but attitudes and behaviors are the most difficult barriers for people with disabilities to overcome.

Be Yourself

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else. Treat the person as an individual, not as a disability. Don’t assume that “disability” is all that person can talk about or is interested in. Find a topic of small talk, the way you would with anyone. As in any new situation, everyone will feel more comfortable if you relax.

Meeting Someone

Use a normal voice when extending a verbal welcome. Do not raise your voice unless requested. By your actions and words, you should treat people with disabilities the same as you would anyone else. It’s okay to invite a person that uses a wheelchair to “go for a walk,” or to ask a person who is blind if they “see what you mean.”

People who use wheelchairs may have a variety of different disabilities. Some have use of their arms and some don’t. When you meet someone, extend your hand to shake if that is what you normally do. A person who cannot shake hands will let you know, but he/she will appreciate being treated in a normal way. If you are meeting a person who is blind, identify yourself and also announce when you leave.

Helping

Do not automatically give assistance. Ask first if the person wants help. Assistance with doors, as long as you are clear of the path, is usually appreciated. Follow the person’s cues, and ask if you are not sure. If your offer of assistance is accepted, listen to or ask for instructions. Don’t be offended if someone refuses your offer. It is his/her choice to be as independent as possible.

Communication

People experience communication disabilities when their ability to receive, send, or process information is reduced.

Talk directly to the person, not to an aide, friend, or interpreter. It is important to make eye contact. If you don’t understand someone, ask the person to repeat it. If the person doesn’t understand you when you speak, try again. Sometimes it takes repeated attempts at listening or speaking. If the person uses a wheelchair, sit down yourself and converse at the same level. When appropriate, offer to make public information available in an alternate format.

Environments

Be sensitive about the setting. A noisy or dark environment, or many people talking at the same time, might make it difficult for people with vision, speech, hearing, or some hidden disabilities to participate fully in a conversation. Be aware of clear paths of travel for people who are blind or use wheelchairs or other mobility aids. Describe goings-on and surroundings (especially obstacles) to a person who is blind. Be aware that a person with chemical sensitivity may have a reaction to smoke, perfume, or other toxins in the environment.

Socializing

Do not leave people with disabilities out of a conversation or activity because you feel uncomfortable or fear that they will feel uncomfortable. Include them as you would anyone else. They know what they can do, and what they want to do. Let it be their decision whether or not to participate.

Touching

Guide dogs and other service animals are working animals. Do not pet or touch them unless you have specific permission. Do not touch a person with a disability unless there is a good reason, such as shaking hands in greeting or if the person has requested assistance. However, you may gently touch a person who is Deaf to get their attention. Never push a person’s wheelchair without their permission.

Auxiliary Aids

Do not touch someone’s cane, wheelchair, or other device. It is a part of that person’s mobility aid. If you are interested in a demonstration of someone’s electronic aid, ask. Do not try to use such equipment unless you are invited to do so.

Hidden Disabilities

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may have trouble following a conversation, may not respond when you call or wave, or may say or do something that seems inappropriate. The person may have a hidden disability, such as low vision, a seizure disorder, hearing loss, a cognitive disability, a brain injury, mental illness, or a health condition. These are just a few of the many different types of hidden disabilities. Don’t make assumptions about the person or the disability. Be open-minded.
