

DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

Interacting with Persons with Disabilities



PERSONS WITH HEARING LOSS

If you need to attract the attention of a person with hearing loss, touch them lightly on the shoulder or arm. When you speak to people with hearing loss, speak directly to them. With people who use sign language interpreters, speak to them, not to their interpreters. Face them so that they can see your lips. If possible, slow your rate of speech and speak your words clearly. If requested, increase your volume but recognize that shouting typically does not help. Not all people with hearing loss can read lips. For those people, other forms of communication may be necessary. Some may offer to write messages back and forth. For some, American Sign Language (ASL) is their first language, and they may require a sign language interpreter to understand proceedings or join in a conversation.



PERSONS WITH VISIONS LOSS

Be descriptive. Describe goings-on and surroundings especially obstacles, to a blind person. You may need to help orient people with visual disabilities and let them know what's coming up. A piece of advice to follow is to "Be the assistant, not the director." If you're asked for assistance, let a blind person hold your arm as a guide. If they're walking, tell them when they need to step up or step down; let them know if the door is to their right or left; and warn them of possible hazards. You don't have to speak loudly to people with visual disabilities. Most of them can hear just fine. When appropriate, offer to read written information for a person with a visual disability. It's okay to ask blind people if they "see what you mean." If you're meeting a blind person, identify yourself. If you've met before, remind the person of the context because they won't have the visual cues to jog the memory.



PERSONS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Don't assume the person isn't listening because you're not getting any verbal or visual feedback. Instead, ask whether they understand or agree. Don't assume you have to explain everything to people with learning disabilities. They don't necessarily have a problem with general comprehension. When necessary, offer to read written material aloud.



PERSONS WITH HIDDEN DISABILITIES

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may have difficulty 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 poor vision, a seizure disorder, a hearing loss, a learning disability, a brain injury, a mental disability, 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.



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PERSONS WITH MOBILITY DISABILITIES

A person in a wheelchair is a “wheelchair user” or a person using a wheelchair.” Talk directly to the person, not to an aide, and don’t assume a companion is an aide. When having an extended conversation with someone in a wheelchair or scooter, try sitting or crouching down to their approximate height. It’s okay to invite a person in a wheelchair to “go for a walk.” Never touch or lean on a person’s wheelchair unless you have permission, because it is that person’s personal space. Give a push only when asked. Enable people who use crutches, canes, walkers, wheelchairs, or scooters to keep their mobility aids within reach, unless they request otherwise. Be aware of what is and isn’t accessible to people who use mobility aids such as wheelchairs and walkers. People who use wheelchairs may have a variety of disabilities. Some have use of their arms, and some don’t. When you meet such a person, extend your hand to shake if that’s what you normally do. A person who can’t shake your hand will let you know, or they will appreciate being treated in a normal way.



PERSONS WITH SPEECH DISABILITIES

Listen patiently and carefully. Address persons with speech disabilities as you would anyone else in the same situation. Don’t complete sentences for a person with a speech disability unless they specifically ask you for help. Don’t pretend you understand what they say, just to be polite. Go to a quiet room if necessary. Don’t let able-bodied people interrupt a person with a speech disability, simply because they talk louder. If you don’t understand what’s said to you, ask the person to repeat it or say it a different way. Keep good eye contact. If a person with a speech disability is using a trained speech interpreter or relayer, speak to and keep eye contact with the person, not the person interpreting what’s being said. If the person uses an amplifier or other device, don’t touch it, as this is part of his or her personal space.

GENERAL ETIQUETTE

People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. Always emphasize the person first. Avoid the terms “handicapped,” “physically challenged,” and other similar references. The preferred usage is “people with disabilities” or “persons with disabilities.” The term “disabled people” although used, may be offensive because this term defines people as disabled first and people second.

