

# DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

Disability etiquette is nothing more than ensuring that effective communication and positive interactions occur with everyone you meet.

The needs and abilities of people with disabilities vary from person to person, even among individuals who are considered to have a similar type of disability. Some people require no more assistance from you than anyone else, while others may in fact need some assistance with certain things at certain times.

A positive interaction often involves little more than taking a bit of extra time with someone.

## For example:

- Moving to a quiet place to talk to someone who has a hearing or speech disability
- Arranging an alternative meeting place for someone who uses a wheelchair
- Personally escorting someone who has a visual impairment to their meeting location



## People First Language

The words we use communicate ideas, and can also communicate attitudes and beliefs. Knowing the impact of certain language helps you avoid offending someone by mistake. “People first” language focuses on the person and not on a disability.

## Notice how these examples emphasize the whole person:

- A “person who is blind” instead of a “blind person”
- A “person who has cancer” and not a “cancer victim”
- A person is not “confined to a wheelchair” instead they “use a wheelchair”

It is a good idea to avoid words that suggest people are helpless, such as “suffers from,” “challenged” and “victim”. It is also important to address adults with disabilities as you would any adult. Avoid changing the pitch of your voice or using terms such as “honey” or “sweetheart”.



## General Tips for Engaging People with Disabilities

- Trust your instincts about offering assistance. Ask “Can I assist you?” then let the person tell you what they need. Listen to them and respond according to their instructions. If they decline assistance, please do not insist on helping.
- Look at and speak directly to the individual, rather than the person who may happen to be with them.
- Ask permission before moving a person’s mobility aids out of reach.
- Decline a request if you are not comfortable with it or are not able to comply.
- Don’t let your fear of doing or saying something “wrong” prevent you from getting to know a person with a disability. Just engage in conversation as you would with any other person.

While the above tips apply to all people with disabilities, there are some guidelines for interacting with people with specific types of disabilities such as learning, mental health, cognitive, vision, hearing, speech and mobility.

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Putting abilities to work in Massachusetts.



## The Bottom Line

If you normally greet people with a handshake, greet people with disabilities with a handshake. With your words – and actions – treat people with disabilities just as you would treat anyone else. People with disabilities are people first.

For more information, contact Work Without Limits toll-free at 1-877-YES-WORK (937-9675).

