

Disability Etiquette Guide

Everyday strategies for effective communication with people with disabilities



Introduction

Disability etiquette is nothing more than ensuring that effective communication and positive interactions occur with everyone you meet. Understanding disability is a key first step in creating inclusive experiences.

What is Disability?

You may feel that you can't define disability, but you know it when you see it. There may be visual clues, such as a wheelchair, guide dog, or cane. However, some disabilities are not immediately apparent ("hidden") or observable ("invisible") such as chronic illnesses, low vision, speech impairment, intellectual disability, and mental illness.

"Disability" is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of conditions that may be either temporary or permanent:

- Physical disabilities like mobility impairments often come to mind first, but other non-apparent physical disabilities include intellectual, low vision or chronic illness.
- Mental health disabilities are less visible, often intermittent and episodic, but no less disabling.
- Intellectual disabilities occur with varying levels of severity.
- Blindness or deafness may be complete or partial.
- Chronic illness can fluctuate and be very debilitating, as with chronic pain.

One in five Americans has some form of disability, and one in three households has a disabled member.

Because there is diversity among and within disabilities, needs 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. No two people are the same – with or without a disability! A positive interaction often involves little more than taking a bit of extra time with someone. However, always ASK and never assume what is needed.

People First Language

The words we use communicate ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Knowing the impact of certain language helps you avoid uncomfortable situations and offending someone.. "People first" language focuses on the person and not the disability. Notice how these examples are positive, factual, and emphasize the whole person:

- Say "a person who is blind" instead of "a blind person"
- Refer to someone as "a person who has cancer" and not "a cancer victim"
- A person is not "confined to a wheelchair" instead they "use a wheelchair"
- When someone shares they have a disability, a great response is, "Thank you for sharing that with me" instead of "I'm so sorry to hear that"

Avoid words that suggest people are helpless. Words and phrases such as "suffers from," "challenged", and "victim" are to be avoided.

Disability Etiquette Guide

Tips for Engaging People with Disabilities

Disability Etiquette is about how a person HANDLES diverse situations:

- **“HELLO”** - Don't let your fear of doing or saying something “wrong” prevent you from getting to know a person with a disability. Just say, “Hello” and engage in the same conversation topic that you would, with any other person.
- **ASK** – If you are not sure what to do or say, always ASK first. Never assume.
- **NO** – It's ok to accept “no” for an answer. Trust your instincts about offering assistance if you think it will be helpful. Ask “Can I assist you?” then let the person take the lead by telling you what they need. Listen to them and respond according to their instructions. If they decline assistance, do not insist on helping. Also, feel free to decline a request if you are not comfortable with it or are not able to comply.
- **DIFFERENT** – Every person and every disability is different.
- **LIKE ADULTS** – Treat adults like adults. Avoid changing the pitch of your voice, using terms of endearment such as “honey” or “sweetheart”, or tapping on the head or hand.
- **ENGAGE** – Don't avoid. Look at and speak directly to an individual with a disability, rather than the person who may happen to be with them.

Learning Disabilities

A learning disability may or may not be apparent. A learning disability is a neurological condition that interferes with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information. Learning disabilities should not be confused with intellectual disabilities, autism, deafness, blindness, and behavioral disorders.

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone who has a learning disability:

- Speak directly to the person and use clear, concrete, and task-specific language in a regular speaking voice.
- Be patient and flexible. You may need to repeat information more than once or provide written directions or instructions.

- People with dyslexia or other reading disabilities have trouble reading written information. Give verbal explanation or allow extra time for reading.
- If the area is loud and has many distractions, consider moving to a quieter area.

Mental Health Disabilities

A mental health disability may or may not be apparent. It is a medical condition that can disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Mental health disabilities can affect persons of any age, race, religion or income and are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing. Mental health disabilities are treatable and recovery is possible.

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone who has a mental health disability:

- Take the necessary time to listen to the person. Be calm and respectful. Be empathetic and flexible.
- Consider moving the conversation to a less crowded and quieter place.
- Stress can affect a person's ability to function. Try to keep the pressure of the situation to a minimum.
- Some people may not use eye contact or may be easily distracted. This should not be interpreted as rude.
- People who have mental health disabilities have different ways of coping with the condition. Treat each person as an individual. Ask what will make him or her most comfortable and respect his or her needs to the maximum extent possible.
- Although rare, if a conversation becomes confrontational, do not escalate, seek assistance.
- In a crisis, stay calm and be supportive as you would with anyone. Ask how you can help and find out if there is a support person who can be requested.

Cognitive or Intellectual Disabilities

A cognitive or intellectual disability may or may not be apparent. It can affect a person's understanding, memory, language, judgment, learning and communication functions. These disabilities include individuals with intellectual disabilities, head injury, strokes, autism, and Alzheimer's disease.

Disability Etiquette Guide

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone who has a cognitive or intellectual disability:

- Offer information in a clear, concise, concrete manner. Added forms of visual communication such as gestures, facial expressions, pictures, diagrams or demonstrations are sometimes helpful.
- If you are not being understood, adjust your method of communicating. For example, demonstrate what you are trying to communicate verbally. When necessary, repeat information using different words or a different form of communication. Allow time for the information to be fully understood.
- A slow response or lack of response does not necessarily mean the person is not aware of you or what you said. Allow time for people to process your words, respond slowly or in their own way.
- Make sure the person understands your message.
- When offering help, wait until your offer is accepted before doing anything.
- Do not assume all people can read well or read at all. Use simple pictures or drawings to show instructions.
- Treat and interact with the person who has an intellectual disability as an adult.

Visual Disabilities

Visual disabilities may or may not be apparent. There is a wide range of people with vision impairments, from people who are totally blind to those who are legally blind but have limited eyesight. Often, there is no way for a casual observer to determine if someone does, in fact, have a vision impairment. People with vision impairments may or may not wear glasses, have a guide dog, or use a cane.

Many people feel uncomfortable using certain words around people with a vision impairment. However, you should not worry about that. In everyday conversation it is natural to use words like “look,” “see” or “watch.” As a matter of fact, many people with vision impairments use these words in their everyday language: “I was watching this show on TV last night...”

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone who has a visual disability:

- When you meet a person using a guide dog or cane, make your presence known and identify yourself so

they know where and who you are. Speak directly to the individual and do not yell. Also, let them know when you are leaving by saying something such as, “It was nice seeing you. I am leaving now”.

- Offer assistance. If the offer is declined, do not insist on helping.
- If people want assistance in reaching a destination, ask them what you can do to be most helpful. Many people will want you to let them take your elbow or shoulder for guidance. While walking, advise them of any upcoming obstacles or changes in surface level.
- When giving directions, give specific, non-visual information. For example, tell the person to “walk two blocks and then take a left.” Don’t tell them to “walk down to the red brick building

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Hearing disabilities may or may not be apparent. They range from being totally deaf to people who are hard of hearing. Just as there is a wide range of hearing loss, individual communication needs vary as well: some people may use sign language or read lips; some people use speech; some use hearing aids; some people communicate in writing by hand, while some use technology. There are also people who use pantomime; and others may just need you to speak clearly. The best way to have an effective conversation is to ask how they prefer to communicate. Good eye contact and a well-paced conversation helps!

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone who is Deaf or hard of hearing:

- Being prepared with pen and paper might be helpful, but some individuals who have been deaf from birth may never have learned written English.
- Speech to text apps/features are readily available on smart phones. Ask if that might be a communication option?
- If someone is using an interpreter, speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter.
- Do not assume that people can read your lips (aka speech read); this is a skill that is not always easily acquired.
- If a person does speech read, make sure that you face them and that your mouth is not obstructed when you speak.

Disability Etiquette Guide

- Make sure that the communication is understood on both sides; repeat your understanding of the discussion for verification.
- Never pretend that you understand what is being said when you do not. If the communication is technical in nature, or you are having trouble communicating, consider putting the conversation on hold until an interpreter can be secured.
- Be patient. Some individuals may need you to repeat yourself more than once or may need to speak to you in a space without background noise.

Speech Disabilities

Speech disabilities may not be immediately, but quickly become apparent. Sometimes people with speech disabilities are mistakenly thought to be intoxicated or unable to understand what you are saying. It's important to note that speech disabilities are related only to speech, not comprehension.

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone who has a speech disability:

- Give the person your full attention to better understand what is being said.
- Speak in a regular tone of voice.
- Never attempt to finish a person's sentence.
- Only interrupt the person if you do so politely and after an extended period of time. Explain that you do not understand all of what is being said, paraphrase what you thought you heard, and ask for confirmation. If there is someone else with this person, do not ask this person to interpret.
- Ask follow-up questions and summarize your understanding of the conversation for verification.
- If someone uses a communication device, take the necessary time to interact with the individual using the device. Such devices can be very simple boards, with words or pictures painted on them, or may be sophisticated computer applications that replicate human speech. If you have not interacted with anyone using a device like this, ask how best to do so.
- If you continue to have difficulty understanding what is being said, ask the person if they can state it in a different way. Most people with speech

disabilities know that others have difficulty understanding them and are very willing to repeat themselves.

Mobility Disabilities

Mobility disabilities are often, but not always be apparent. Be aware of your surroundings; it should be accessible for all people at all times. It is up to each one of us to ensure that pathways are accessible since we never know when someone who uses a wheelchair or other mobility device will need to get by. An accessible pathway is one that is wide enough for a wheelchair to pass through and is not blocked by chairs, boxes or other items. It is also a curb cut that is not blocked by snow or a car.

When you see someone with a mobility disability, do not make any assumptions about that person's ability. There is a wide range of physical abilities that may require different degrees of assistance. Some people do not use a wheelchair exclusively; they may also use a cane, crutches or a leg brace. There are also other people who do not use any assistive devices but would still be considered to have a mobility disability; for example, someone with a heart condition.

Things to keep in mind when you meet someone with a mobility disability:

- Ask the person if assistance is needed and how you can be of help. If they decline assistance, do not insist on helping.
- Never lean on, touch, or push a person's wheelchair; it's part of their personal space. There is also no need to bend down to talk to someone in a wheelchair, though for extended conversations, you might be more comfortable sitting.
- When giving directions to a person using a wheelchair, consider things such as stairs, curbs, and steep hills. Keep accessible entrances, elevators, and parking spaces in mind.
- When giving directions to a person using crutches or a cane, ask if they would prefer the shortest route (which may include stairs) or a route that uses an elevator (but may be further away).
- When accompanying a person who uses a wheelchair, be prepared to point out wheelchair seating or to remove a chair.

Disability Etiquette Guide

Service Animals

It is natural for people to want to pet animals - especially dogs. Before petting any dog, courtesy would dictate that you ask permission. However, do not pet or even ask to pet a service or guide dog. They are working animals and need to stay focused on assisting their owners. It is the service animal's responsibility to keep their owner safe. Think of service animals as assistive devices such as a wheelchair, cane, or phone. They are highly personal and customized to meet their owner's need. Though it might be obvious, most service animals wear marked vests. Save your "Can I pet your dog?" request for owners with dogs that are clearly not service animals.

Did you know that guide dogs for people who are blind have been taught "intelligent disobedience"? If the dog is given a command to "go forward," but recognizes that it would be dangerous, the dog would "disobey" this command and the owner would then know not to proceed.

Things to keep in mind with regards to service or guide dogs:

- People with service animals are allowed to go everywhere that people without service animals go. This includes restaurants, movie theaters, rest rooms and all other locations that may be frequented by members of the public.
- People with service animals are not required to carry any special proof or ID pertaining to the service animal.
- A service animal must always be under control by its owner.
- If a person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the dog.

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. It is important to remember that we are all different and need to be recognized for what we are capable of doing, not for what we may require assistance to accomplish.

Contact [Work Without Limits](#) to discuss your training needs!

Visit WorkWithoutLimits.org to view our full menu of trainings as well as access to more disability resources!

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