

## ETIQUETTE OF COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

It is not uncommon for people to be uncomfortable around individuals with disabilities because they are unsure of what to do, what is correct, and what will offend. The best strategy is to be sensitive and flexible. A lack of sensitivity or flexibility makes situations awkward at best, and at worst it can cause unintentional discrimination. Talking about disability is often difficult, partly because the terminology is unclear and laden with connotations.

The accepted terminology, "person with a disability," puts the emphasis on the person, not the limitations or disability. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. Above all, use common sense, be respectful, polite, considerate, offer assistance, communicate and don't hesitate to ask questions.

### CORRECT TERMINOLOGY

<b>Say:</b>	<b>Don't say:</b>
√ Person with a disability	× victim, suffers from, deformed
√ person with cerebral palsy or vision impairment etc.	× afflicted by/ with, or blind/can't see
√ person with a physical disability	× crippled, the crippled, crippling, invalid
√ uses a wheelchair	× wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair
√ person with a hearing impairment, hearing loss or person who is deaf	× deaf and dumb, deaf mute, mute
√ accessible parking, accessible toilets, etc.	× Disabled toilets, handicapped parking, etc.

Remember that people with disabilities are as diverse as others. They may have terminology preferences that should be respected.

### COMMUNICATION TIPS:

<b>Do:</b>	<b>Don't:</b>
√ Look at the individual when addressing him or her.	× Tell an individual you admire his/her courage or determination.
√ Ask an individual about the best way to communicate if you are unsure.	× Stare at or avoid looking at a visible disability.
√ Speak directly to a person with a disability, even if he or she is accompanied by a person without a disability.	× Express sympathy for the individual.
√ Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but don't assume he or she will accept it.	× Presume the individual is more fragile or sensitive than others.
√ Extend your hand to shake when meeting someone, even someone with a physical disability.	× Assume someone with a speech or hearing impediment is intellectually impaired.
√ If you offer assistance, wait for acceptance and instructions before proceeding. Remember that not everyone will want or need assistance, and their wishes should be respected.	× Feel uncomfortable using the word "see" when addressing a blind person, or "hear" when addressing a hearing impaired person.

**ETIQUETTE FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH...****...hearing impairments**

- To get a person's attention, gently touch the person on the shoulder or tactfully wave your hand.
- Make sure the person is looking at you when you speak to them.
- Be aware of room or window lighting and position yourself to ensure maximum light on your face.
- Look directly at the person and speak clearly, especially if the person wishes to lip-read. You may also want to speak a little bit slower. Do not exaggerate lip movements.
- Be flexible. If the person doesn't understand something, reword it instead of simply repeating it. Use notes or visual expressions / clues to illustrate what you are saying.
- You can always use a pad and pencil to communicate if it becomes necessary.
- Reduce unnecessary background noise – this can interfere with hearing aids and make communication difficult.
- Do not shout. It may not be necessary or appropriate. Ask the person how they would prefer to communicate. Ask if they can hear you OK.
- Ask short clear questions that require only short answers if possible.
- Don't refer to a deaf person as "deaf and dumb". Some people who are deaf can speak, others are "nonverbal" and use sign language.
- Relax and don't be embarrassed if you use terms like "Did you hear about..."
- Make sure the person has understood you. If not sure, write it down anyway.
- If there is a sign language interpreter present, face the individual when talking, not the interpreter.
- Position a signing interpreter so that he or she is near you and visible.

**...visual impairments**

- Speak directly to the person in a normal tone of voice.
- DON'T SHOUT. Vision problems and deafness are not related impairments.
- When meeting, identify yourself and others with you. When conversing in a group, identify whom you are addressing.
- Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but pay attention to the person's response - take your cues from him or her.
- Be specific with verbal directions to places, give approximate distances and don't use comments like, "Over there..".
- Do not presume that the person can't see anything, if appropriate it is OK to ask what they can see.
- When preparing printed information, ensure that font size is at least 16 and preferably in a plain font, (for example – "Arial") and avoid using coloured paper where possible.
- Ensure good lighting – subdued lighting or very bright lighting makes things particularly difficult for people with vision problems.
- Walk alongside and slightly ahead of the person; don't hold onto the person's arm, allow them to take your arm if they need assistance.
- Avoid escalators and revolving doors if possible. On the stairs, assist the person by putting his or her hand on the railing.
- When assisting in sitting down, put the person's hand on the back of the chair.
- Don't leave people who are blind in an open area or without saying that you are leaving. When you leave, lead the person to a landmark so he or she can get a sense of direction.
- Do not move items that the person is familiar with, in their environment.
- Do not pat a guide dog - you may distract the dog from its important job.
- When speaking in a group, identify to whom you are referring. Relax and don't be embarrassed if you use terms like "See what I mean?" or "See you later".

### **...physical disabilities**

- If possible, be seated so the person doesn't have to look up. Communicate at eye level with the person. Speak directly to the individual, not to a person who is assisting him or her.
- DON'T SHOUT. Deafness and physical disabilities are not related impairments.
- Never patronise people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Ensure that they have a clear pathway to their intended destination and at meetings or restaurants, make a chair-free space at the table for the wheelchair user
- Push the wheelchair only when asked. Don't presume a person in a wheelchair needs your help to push him or her.
- When assisting in going up or down a curb, ask if he or she prefers going forward or backward.
- Keep the chair tilted back when assisting on steps.
- Be prepared - learn the locations of ramps and accessible facilities.
- Never hang or lean on a person's wheelchair - the chair is part of one's personal body space and hanging on it can be very annoying.
- NEVER presume that a non verbal person does not understand what you are saying.

### **...intellectual disability**

- BE PATIENT.
- Make instructions clear and brief, but don't be condescending – they deserve your respect. Don't be frustrated if you have to repeat yourself.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat something if you don't understand.
- Pay attention, particularly if the person has a speech impediment. Don't complete sentences for him or her.
- Speak directly to the individual, not to a person who is assisting him or her.

### **Supervising People with Disabilities**

- Help the person fit in - just like you would any new employee. Describe the formal and informal requirements of the job. Introduce the person to co-workers. Encourage others to include the individual, but don't try to force relationships on anyone.
- Be sensitive to a person's limitations, but don't lower traditional performance standards. Consider changing your supervisory style.
- Provide the same feedback as you would to other employees, and don't be afraid to bring up criticisms. The person may offer alternative strategies for dealing with difficulties.
- Encourage the individual to pursue career development and training opportunities, just as you would any other employees.
- Arrange training for staff to be more aware of the disability and how to best accommodate the person's needs.