

DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

There are more than 56 million Americans - nineteen percent of the population - with disabilities. Ninety percent of the population will have a disability during their lifespan. Practicing disability etiquette is an easy way to make people with disabilities feel welcome. This information provides some basic tips on disability etiquette. If you are ever unsure about what to do or what to say when you meet a person who has a disability, just ask her or him. Relax and be yourself.

People with disabilities are like everyone else. They are people first and have the same hopes, dreams, fears, hobbies, jobs and interests as the rest of the community. People with disabilities go to school, work and participate in community activities. While the disability is an integral part of who they are, it alone does not define them. It is just a part of the whole self, like being right handed or having red hair or blue eyes. Accept people with disabilities as individuals, entitled to the same respect and treatment you would want for yourself. Always emphasize a person's abilities rather than limitations rather than making people with disabilities into heroes or victims. Disability is as diverse as the community we live in – people with disabilities represent every culture, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, etc.

Some disabilities are visible and some are not. Someone who uses a cane or a wheelchair obviously has a disability. However, many disabilities are “hidden” such as learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities and some physical disabilities. Epilepsy, cancer, arthritis and heart conditions are some examples of “hidden” physical disabilities. People tend to believe these are not bona fide disabilities, but they are. Although the disabilities are not visible, these individuals are legitimately affected in their major life activities.

THE BASICS

ASK BEFORE YOU HELP. Just because someone has a disability, don't assume he needs help. If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people. Offer assistance only if he appears to need it. If he does want help, ask how before you act.

BE SENSITIVE ABOUT PHYSICAL CONTACT. Not everyone can shake hands. Try a nod or a smile instead. Do not pat an individual with a disability on the head. He or she is not a pet or toy. People with disabilities are people.

SPEAK DIRECTLY TO THE PERSON WITH A DISABILITY, not to her companion, aide or sign language interpreter. Do not raise your voice when speaking to an individual with a disability. Just because someone has a physical or developmental disability, it doesn't mean they are also hard of hearing. Making small talk with a person who has a disability is great; just talk to her as you would anyone else. Respect her privacy. If you ask about her disability, she may feel like you are treating her as a disability, not as a human being. Most people with disabilities do not mind children asking questions because they are comfortable with children's natural curiosity and acceptance. Let your child talk to people with disabilities.

DON'T STARE AT INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES. Just as it is not polite or proper to stare at people without disabilities, it is unacceptable to stare at people with disabilities but do not pretend the disability does not exist.

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS. People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or can't do. Don't make decisions for him or her about participating in any activity. Make your activities inclusive. Arrange accommodations and be considerate of everyone who may want to participate.

IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS. It's okay to use them when talking to people with disabilities. For example, saying, "It was good to see you," and "see you later," to a person who is blind is completely acceptable.

EXTRA TIME. Be considerate of the extra time a person with a disability may need. Let the person set the pace in talking or walking.

NEVER TOUCH A SERVICE DOG. The dog is working and needs to concentrate. If a person has a service dog, walk on the side opposite the dog.

TREAT ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES AS ADULTS. Don't use baby talk or talk down to people with disabilities. Don't patronize a person with a disability by telling them how courageous they are, patting them on the back or talking to them like children.

PEOPLE WHO LOOK DIFFERENT may not have a disability, but are treated as if they do because of their appearance. People with facial differences or skin conditions; people who are taller or shorter or larger or smaller than average; people who may display visible effects of medication, such as a tremor —people who look different—have the frequent experience of finding people staring at them, looking away or looking through them as if they are invisible. If you see someone who looks different than you, just give him a smile. If appropriate, strike up a conversation and include the person in whatever is going on, just as you would for anyone.

PEOPLE WITH RESPIRATORY DISABILITIES OR MULTIPLE CHEMICAL SENSITIVITIES (MCS) such as asthma or emphysema react to toxins in the air. Stale air, air fresheners, cleaning product fumes, perfumes, carpeting, or even the fumes from magic markers can trigger a severe reaction. Maintaining good ventilation and overall good indoor air quality not only benefits people with respiratory and MCS disabilities, it helps everyone stay healthier and more alert. Second-hand smoke can be particularly harmful to people with respiratory and MCS disabilities. A person with respiratory disabilities is at significant risk of picking up airborne infections. If you have a respiratory infection or any other easily transmittable illness, be considerate of others and stay home, if possible.

PEOPLE WITH HIDDEN DISABILITIES. Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may make a request or act in a way that seems strange to you. That request or behavior may be disability-related. For example, you may give seemingly simple verbal directions to someone, but the person asks you to write the info down. She may have a learning disability that makes written communication easier for him. Someone you think does not appear to have a disability may ask to sit, rather than stand, in line. She may be fatigued from a condition such as cancer, or may be feeling the effects of medication. Even though these disabilities are hidden, they are real.

A WORD ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY: You may really care or you may just be curious about a person with a disability. In spite of your concern, respect the privacy of a person with a disability. Allow him to discuss his disability only if and when he wants to.

COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE TIPS

Words are powerful! Our language shapes our attitudes and our attitudes shape our language. And our words have a profound effect on other people. Think about a time you were having a bad day and someone gave you some encouragement. It made you feel better and helped you push through, right? Now, think about a time you were really excited about something and someone told you that you couldn't do it because you weren't good enough, smart enough, big enough or pretty enough. How did that make you feel? You might not think what you have to say would matter to someone that much, but it does.

Words lead to actions. Good words lead to good actions. Bad words lead to bad actions. By using words or labels that devalue someone as subordinate, it makes it easier to discriminate. Sadly, this has historically happened to people with disabilities. Many old labels focus on the disability, what's different about that person, what someone can't do. But, we can change that.

Always use People First Language. Using People First Language puts the person before the disability. It allows us to focus on what we have in common and our strengths instead of what is different. It isn't that disability isn't a part of that person's life... it's just that it doesn't have to be the one and only defining aspect of their personality. People with disabilities are people first. They are not defined by their conditions or diseases. Putting the person first in our communications is not "political correctness," it is showing respect for the dignity of the individual. The way we view and communicate with and about people with disabilities shape our relationships. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania adopted People First Language in 1992.

SAY	INSTEAD OF
person with a disability	handicap(ped), cripple, special
wheelchair user or person who uses a wheelchair	invalid, confined, bound
non-disabled	normal, able, capable, whole
Deaf or hard of hearing	deaf & dumb, hearing impaired
person with an intellectual disability	retarded, slow, stupid
person who has autism	autistic
person who has... or living with...	suffers from..., victim of..., afflicted with
person living with mental illness	crazy, schizoid, insane
congenital disability	birth defect
little person or person of short stature	dwarf or midget
accessible parking, accessible hotel room, etc.	handicapped parking, room, etc.

APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Below are explanations and appropriate terms for disabilities and examples of how to apply these terms. Not all people with disabilities use the same terminology and different terms may be preferred in some circles and not in others. Begin by using the generally accepted terms below and then respect the individual's terminology preferences, if different. Be aware that many people with disabilities dislike jargony, euphemistic terms like "physically challenged." Never identify people solely by their disability.

Disability. Appropriate: person with a disability. Inappropriate: impaired; crippled; handicapped; handicapped person; or the handicapped. Likewise, use of well-intended but awkward terms such as special need, challenged, handicapable, differently abled, and, handiabled assumes that the person is uncomfortable with their own disability, and it gives the impression that the user of the term is uncomfortable around a person who has a disability. Disability is a general term used for functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, or learn, for example. It may refer to a physical, mental, or sensory condition.

Person who has a disability. Appropriate: person who has multiple sclerosis. Inappropriate: afflicted with, or suffers from, multiple sclerosis. Most people with disabilities do not regard themselves as suffering continually; they do not view their disability as an affliction.

Person who was born with a disability. Appropriate: person with a physical disability; person with no arms. Inappropriate: lame; defective; defect; deformed; invalid; infirmed; vegetable. Such words are offensive, dehumanizing, degrading, and stigmatizing.

Person who incurred a disability. Appropriate: person who incurred a spinal cord injury; person who has post-polio syndrome; person who had a stroke. Inappropriate: victim of a spinal cord injury; stricken with polio; victim of a stroke. People with disabilities do not like to be perceived as victims for the rest of their lives.

Intellectual Disability, Developmental Disability, Autism. Appropriate: person who has an intellectual disability or developmental disability or autism. Inappropriate: mentally retarded; the retarded; autistic; mentally impaired; feeble minded; moron; imbecile; idiot. These terms are offensive to people with intellectual disabilities as well as to the family and friends of those individuals. Presume competence and make no assumptions regarding intellectual disability. Allow for different styles and extra time for processing information. Use clear language and concrete — rather than abstract—concepts. Don't talk down, use baby talk or talk loudly to people with intellectual disabilities. Don't take a lack of response personally- she or he might be overwhelmed. Don't take sudden emotions personally. Sometimes direct eye contact can be difficult for a person with intellectual disabilities. Treat an adult with an intellectual disability as an adult and, unless informed otherwise, allow her to make their own decisions.

Mobility disability. Appropriate: person who uses a wheelchair or crutches; a wheelchair user; walks with crutches. Inappropriate: confined/restricted to a wheelchair; wheelchair bound, physically impaired. Most people who use a wheelchair or mobility device do not regard it as confining. In fact, it becomes an extension of the person and it is viewed as liberating. People who use wheelchairs have varying mobility disabilities. Some people can use their arms and hands and some people can get out of their wheelchairs to walk short distances. Wheel-chair users are

people not equipment. Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair; it's part of their personal space. When talking to a wheelchair user, grab a chair and sit at her level or stand at a slight distance, so he isn't straining his neck to make eye contact.

Short stature. Appropriate: little person; person of short stature. The term little person is one of few exceptions to the notion of placing the term "person" first in our communications.

Inappropriate: deformed; dwarf; midget. The word "midget" is very offensive and has strong negative emotional connotations. There are 200 diagnosed types of growth-related disorders that can cause dwarfism resulting in the person being 4 feet 10 inches or less in height. Use the terms "little" or "short" as contrasted with "big" or "tall" and "average height" or "average stature" instead of normal." For an adult or teenager with dwarfism, being treated as cute and childlike can be a tough obstacle. Never pet or kiss a little person on the head. Communication is easier when people are at the same level. Kneel to be at her level; stand back so you can make eye contact without her straining her neck; or sit in a chair.

Deaf or hard of hearing. Appropriate: person who is deaf; person who is hard of hearing; person with hearing loss. Because of their shared historical and cultural experience, members of this community also consider it acceptable to say deaf person; the deaf; or the deaf community.

When a person is using a sign-language interpreter, look directly at the person who is Deaf, maintain eye contact and talk directly to her rather than to the interpreter. Inappropriate: hearing impaired; deaf and dumb. The inability to speak does not indicate lack of intelligence.

Deafness often refers to a person who has a total loss of hearing. People who are deaf are sometimes able to speak and speechread (i.e. lipread), despite profound hearing loss. Most people who identify themselves as deaf also use sign language which has a different grammatical structure than spoken language. Although American Sign Language (ASL) is the most common form of sign language used in the United States, there are many different sign languages used by members of distinct cultural groups and immigrant communities. Hard of hearing refers to a person who has a partial loss of hearing within a range from slight to severe. Hard of hearing also describes a person who communicates through speaking and speechreading, and who usually has listening and hearing abilities adequate for ordinary telephone communication. Many individuals who are hard of hearing use assistive listening devices such as hearing aids, amplification devices, FM listening systems, etc. Many deaf and hard of hearing people utilize written captioning of audio communications.

Blind or Low Vision. Appropriate: person who is blind; person who has low vision. Because of their shared historical and cultural experience, members of this community also consider it acceptable to say blind person, or the blind. Inappropriate: visually handicapped; visually

impaired. A person with low vision knows how to orient himself and get around even though they may use a cane or a guide dog. Identify yourself especially before you make physical contact with a person who is blind. Tell her your name and introduce him to others who are in the group so that he's not excluded. People who are blind need their arms for balance, so offer your arm, don't take his if he needs assistance. Some people who are blind read and write using Braille as their primary form of written language. People with low vision have a range of visual acuity, with some individuals being able to read large print material. Many people who are blind or who have low vision use assistive technology such as screen readers and screen magnification software to interact with computers and other electronic devices.

Speech disability. Appropriate: person with a speech disability; person who stutters; person who is non-verbal; person who is unable to speak; communication disability. Inappropriate: speech impaired; halted; dumb; mute. The inability to speak does not indicate lack of intelligence. Some people who are non-verbal use augmentative and alternative communication devices, or sign language, to communicate. A person with a speech disability may be difficult to understand. Give the person your full attention. Wait for him to respond. Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences. If you have trouble understanding, don't nod. Just ask him to repeat. In most cases the person won't mind and will appreciate your effort to hear what he has to say. Don't tease or laugh at a person with a speech disability. The ability to communicate effectively and to be taken seriously is important to all of us.

Cerebral Palsy. Appropriate: person with cerebral palsy; Inappropriate: the disabled; the cerebral palsied; People with cerebral palsy (CP) have difficulty controlling their muscles. Many people with CP have no cognitive disability. Many people with CP have involuntary body movements and or slurred speech. Follow the tips for interacting with persons who have speech disabilities.

Sensory Integration/Processing. Appropriate: person with sensory integration or sensory processing disability; Inappropriate: the disabled; person with a sensory disorder. A sensory integration disability exists when a person is not able to process or prioritize sensory inputs from the environment and respond appropriately. She may be over- or under- sensitive and or over- or under- responsive to things in his environment. Sensory processing disabilities exist on a spectrum and may affect one sense, like hearing, touch, vision, smell, taste or body movement or it may affect multiple senses. When a person seems anxious, unable to focus or overwhelmed, ask if something is bothering her and remove the distraction such as turning down the light or turning off the fan or moving to another environment or taking a break when possible.

Mental Illness. Appropriate: person with a mental health condition; person with a psychiatric disability; person with a behavioral health disability. Inappropriate: crazy; freak; maniac; lunatic; psycho. People with mental health conditions are one of the most stigmatized groups due to a long history of discrimination, the misconception that the individual should be able to easily manage the illness and the misconception that mental illness is associated with violent behavior. Because it is a hidden disability, chances are you will not even realize that he has a mental health condition. A mental health condition may interfere with her ability to feel, think or relate to others. Treat each person as an individual and respect his or her needs.

Recovering from a health condition. Appropriate: person recovering from a stroke; a cancer or brain injury survivor. Inappropriate: brain injured; brain damaged; victim of a stroke.

No disability. Appropriate: person who does not have a disability; person without a disability; person who is able to walk, see, hear, etc.; Inappropriate: healthy person or normal person. The term "healthy" implies that the person with a disability is unhealthy. Many people with disabilities have excellent health. Likewise, use of "normal person" implies that the person with a disability is abnormal. No one wants to be labeled as abnormal.

References: United Spinal Association, Access Resources, *Disability Etiquette*; Center for Accessible Living, *ADA & Disability Etiquette*; US Census; US Department of Human Services, *A Guide to Interacting with People who have Disabilities*;