
Etiquette of Communicating with People with a Disability

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Deb Whitecross
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This guide will help you to understand:

- Politically correct language for disability
- The do's and don'ts of communication techniques
- Specific help with the key disability types, and
- Information for work environments

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.

With an aging population, the percentage of people with a permanent disability has increased to 20%. Added to that, another 6% have a temporary disability – that is more than 1 in 4 people has a disability at any one time.

The accepted terminology, **'person with a disability'**, puts the emphasis on the person, not the limitations or disability. Treat people as people. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.

Don't assume you know what the disability is. Many different conditions can present in similar ways. Some disabilities are 'invisible' – they are not immediately obvious when you are speaking to the person but they may still face challenges in communicating with you. Relate to the individual person and respond to their individual needs.

Different cultures also view disability differently and may not share the common view of disability as a physical or physiological issue. Be aware that people from other cultures may be embarrassed if you draw attention to the person with a disability.

Above all, use common sense, be respectful, polite, considerate, offer assistance, communicate and don't hesitate to ask questions. Treat all people in the same way you would wish to be treated yourself.

Correct Terminology

Say:

- Person with a disability
- person with cerebral palsy or vision impairment etc.
- person with a physical disability
- person who uses a wheelchair
- person with a hearing impairment, hearing loss or person who is deaf
- accessible parking, accessible toilets.

Avoid saying:

- victim, suffers from, deformed
- afflicted by/ with, or blind/can't see
- crippled, the crippled, crippling, invalid, spastic
- wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair
- deaf and dumb, deaf mute, mute
- Disabled toilets, handicapped parking.

Note: Place the emphasis on the person not the disability. Remember that people with disabilities are as diverse as others. They may have terminology preferences that should be respected.

Communication tips:

Do:

- Look at the individual when addressing him or her.
- Ask an individual about the best way to communicate if you are unsure.

Don't

- Tell an individual you admire his/her courage or determination.
- 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.
- Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but don't assume he or she will accept it. Wait for acceptance and instruction before proceeding. Respect people's wishes.
- Extend your hand to shake when meeting someone, even someone with a physical disability.
- 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.
- Express sympathy for the individual.
- Presume the individual is more fragile or sensitive than others.
- Assume someone with a speech or hearing impediment is intellectually impaired.
- Feel uncomfortable using the word "see" when addressing a person with a vision impairment, or "hear" when addressing a person with a hearing impairment.

Note:

A ramp that makes a doorway accessible helps people using wheelchairs, or who have recently had a hip replacement as well as people pushing strollers, or delivering items in trolleys.

Etiquette for Communicating or supporting:

People with a hearing impairment

- To get a person's attention, or 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 so that they may read your lips.
- 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 short clear questions that require only short answers
- Ask if the person can hear you and how they would prefer to communicate.
- 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.
- Do not walk between the interpreter and the person.

- In a group, speak one at a time and ensure you have eye contact before speaking.

People with a vision impairment

- 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 to 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. Always give the person an option when using stairs, escalators or a lift.
- When seating people, 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.
- Relax and don't be embarrassed if you use terms like "See what I mean?" or "See you later".
- Close or open doors fully rather than leaving them ajar.
- Ask people with a vision impairment what they need and want.
- **SPEAK DIRECTLY TO THE PERSON RATHER THAN DIRECTING QUESTIONS THROUGH THEIR COMPANION**

People with a physical disability

- 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 or steep ramps.
- Be prepared - learn the locations of ramps and accessible facilities.
- NEVER presume that a non verbal person does not understand what you are saying.

- 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.

People with a speech impairment

The following are some tips for talking to people with speech that is difficult to understand. Some people may have difficulty understanding speech as well but many do not – don't assume.

- Don't raise your voice they may not be deaf.
- Talk in a quiet environment if possible.
- Be patient and don't take over the conversation because you are afraid you won't understand the person speaking.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat themselves, they are aware their speech is hard to understand.
- Ask the person to rephrase with different words if you can't understand.
- If the person is using a communication aid, refrain from reading the screen as they type.
- Don't pretend to understand if you haven't.
- Ask if there is someone nearby to interpret for you.
- Acknowledge if you have not been successful despite all efforts and ask whether the message was urgent.
- Never presume that a person who is non verbal does not understand what you are saying, they may require the assistance of a communication aid.

People with a cognitive impairment or learning disability

A cognitive impairment is a disability which affects a person's ability to process information. It may be due to an intellectual disability which a person was born with or it may be due an acquired brain injury like a stroke or injury to the head. People with a cognitive impairment or learning disability vary greatly in their abilities, so always respond to the individuals needs rather than making assumptions about their abilities.

- **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.
- Sometimes it may be helpful to write information down or to use pictures for people who difficulty with memory. Ask if they would like you to write it down

People with a mental illness

One in five adults will experience a mental health problem at some time in their life. Mental health issues at different times can cause changes to a persons thinking, perception, feeling and emotional state. These changes can lead to behaviours that are out of context and do not match the situation as you would expect. People living with mental illness usually manage these symptoms with medication and support.

Social interaction can often be difficult for a person experiencing and period of illness. Be non-judgemental and allow time for interaction and decision making. If a person speaks slowly or appears unfocussed, it is usually due to the impact of the illness or medication.

If you are interacting with a person and you notice that the person:

- Is disoriented and responding to events and perceptions that you do not share, this indicates that the person may have lost with reality.
- Is becoming highly anxious and frightened to the extent that the belief of threat is governing their behaviour, this indicates paranoia.
- Is displaying unusual or inappropriate behaviour or emotion.
- **BE CALM!**
- Read the body language to assess the situation. Non verbal communication can be very helpful in times of confusion. Allow the person their space and initially avoid eye contact and touch.
- Show understanding and compassion. Empathise with their feelings without necessarily agreeing with what is being said.
- Ask how you can help. The person may ask you to sit with them, they may be carrying an emergency contact number that you could ring. Respect the person's situation and do not pressure your assistance on them.
- Don't take things personally. Remember that the individual may not have the insight into their behaviour and its impact on other people.
- Use short clear direct sentences to minimise confusion and keep your voice tone low and unhurried.
- Do talk to the individual again. Symptoms of a serious episode are successfully managed with medication and support. See the person not the illness.

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.
- Use language the employee can understand.

For more information contact:

Deb Whitecross Enterprises Pty Ltd
P O Box 491 Ballarat 3353

T: (03) 5334 4358 M: 0428 991 671
W: www.disabilityconsultants.com.au
E: deb@disabilityconsultants.com.au

