

Communicating With and About People with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act, other laws and the efforts of many disability organizations have made strides in improving accessibility in buildings, increasing access to education, opening employment opportunities and developing realistic portrayals of persons with disabilities in television programming and motion pictures. Where progress is still needed is in communication and interaction with people with disabilities. Individuals are sometimes concerned that they will say the wrong thing, so they say nothing at all—thus further segregating people with disabilities. Listed here are some suggestions on how to relate to and communicate with and about people with disabilities.

Words

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as "the blind," "the retarded" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. Further, words like "normal person" imply that the person with a disability isn't normal, whereas "person without a disability" is descriptive but not negative. The accompanying chart shows examples of positive and negative phrases.

Affirmative Phrases	Negative Phrases
person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability	retarded; mentally defective
person who is blind, person who is visually impaired	the blind
person with a disability	the disabled; handicapped
person who is deaf	the deaf; deaf and dumb
person who is hard of hearing	suffers a hearing loss
person who has multiple sclerosis	afflicted by MS
person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder	epileptic
person who uses a wheelchair	confined or restricted to a wheelchair
person who has muscular dystrophy	stricken by MD
person with a physical disability, physically disabled	crippled; lame; deformed
unable to speak, uses synthetic speech	dumb; mute
person with psychiatric disability	crazy; nuts
person who is successful, productive	has overcome his/her disability; is courageous (when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability)

Actions

Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Outlined below are tips to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities.

General Tips for Communicating with People with Disabilities

- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- Speak to the individual when you approach him or her.
- State clearly who you are; speak in a normal tone of voice.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person to whom you are speaking.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the owner.
- Tell the individual when you are leaving.
- Do not attempt to lead the individual without first asking; allow the person to hold your arm.
- Be descriptive when giving verbal directions. For example, if you're approaching steps, mention how many.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the individual's hand on the back or arm of the chair.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Gain the person's attention before starting a conversation (i.e., tap the person gently on the shoulder/arm).
- Look directly at the individual, speak clearly and keep your hands away from your face.
- If the individual uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Mobility Impairments

- If possible, put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level.
- Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device.
- Do not assume the individual wants to be pushed —ask first.
- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening a door.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Speech Impairments

- If you do not understand something the individual says, ask the individual to repeat what he or she said.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.
- Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish her or his sentences.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Cognitive Disabilities

- If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.

Remember

- Relax and treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual and offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

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