

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Do not be afraid to make a mistake when meeting and communicating with someone with a disability. Try following the suggestions below. Imagine how YOU would react if you were in similar situations. Keep in mind that a person who has a disability is a person, and, like you, is entitled to the dignity, consideration, respect, and right you expect for yourself.
- Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others present. (Never patronize people by patting them on the head or shoulder.)
- Don't know what to do? Allow the person who has a disability to put you at ease.
- If you offer assistance and the person declines, do not insist. If it is accepted, ask how you can best help, and follow directions. Do not take over.
- If someone with a disability is accompanied by another individual, address the person with a disability directly rather than speaking through the other person.

"PEOPLE FIRST" TERMINOLOGY

- Place the person before the disability. Say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person."
- Avoid referring to people by the disability they have, i.e., "an epileptic or blind people." A person is not a condition. Rather, refer to "a person with epilepsy or people who are blind."
- People are not "bound or confined" to wheelchairs. They use them to increase their mobility and enhance their freedom. It is more accurate to say "wheelchair user or person who uses a wheelchair."

PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

- Do not make assumptions about what a person can and cannot do. A person with a physical disability is the best judge of his or her own capabilities. Some users can walk; the aid and use of a wheelchair allows them to move quickly and conserve energy.
- Do not push a person's wheelchair or grab the arm of someone walking with difficulty, without first asking if you can be of assistance. Personal space includes a person's wheelchair, crutches walker or cane. Please do not lean on, or sit in a person's wheelchair when they are not around.
- Never move someone's wheelchair, crutches, walker or cane without permission.
When a wheelchair user transfers out of the wheelchair to a bi ski, mono ski, toilet or car, do not move the wheelchair out of reaching distance.
- When speaking to a person using a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, try to find a seat for yourself so the two of you are at eye level.
- It is OK to use expressions like "running along" when speaking to a wheelchair user. It is likely the user expresses things the same way.
- Do not assume that using a wheelchair is a tragedy. It is a means of freedom that allows the user to move about independently.

COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

- Treat adults with cognitive disabilities relative to their chronological age.
- When speaking to someone who has a cognitive disability, try to be alert to their responses so that you can adjust your method of communication if necessary. Some people may benefit from simple, direct sentences or from supplementary visual forms of communication, such as gestures, diagrams, or demonstrations.
- People with brain injuries may have short-term memory deficits and may repeat themselves or require information to be repeated.
- People with auditory perceptual problems may need to have directions repeated, and may take notes to help them remember directions or the sequence of tasks. They may benefit from watching a task demonstrated.
- People with perceptual or "sensory overload" problems may become disoriented or confused if there is too much to absorb at once. Provide information gradually and clearly. Reduce background noise if possible.
- Repeat information using different wording or a different communication approach if necessary. Allow time for the information to be fully understood.
- Do not pretend to understand. Ask the person to repeat what was said.
- In conversation, people with mental retardation may respond slowly, so give them time. Be patient, flexible, and supportive.
- Some people who have a cognitive disability may be easily distracted. Try not to interpret distraction as rudeness.
- Do not expect all people to be able to read well. Some may not read at all.

VISUAL DISABILITIES

- Identify yourself when you approach a person who is blind. If a new person approaches, introduce him or her.
- It is appropriate to touch the person's arm lightly when you speak so that he or she knows you are speaking to him or her.
- Face the person and speak directly to him or her. Use a normal tone of voice.
- Don't leave without saying you are leaving.
- If you are offering directions, be as specific as possible, and point out obstacles in the path of travel. Use clock cues ("The door is at 2 o'clock").
- Alert people who are blind or visually impaired to posted information.
- Never pet or otherwise distract a guide dog without owner permission.
- You may offer assistance if it seems needed, but if your offer is declined, do not insist. If your offer is accepted, ask the person how you can best help.

HEARING DISABILITIES

- Ask the person how he or she prefers to communicate.
- Talk directly to the person who is deaf or hard of hearing, not to the interpreter. However, although it may seem awkward to you, the person who is deaf or hard of hearing will look at the interpreter and may not make eye contact with you during the conversation.
- Before you start to speak, make sure you have the attention of the person you are addressing. A wave, a light touch on the shoulder, or other visual or tactile signals are appropriate ways of getting the person's attention.
- Speak in a clear, expressive manner. Do not over-enunciate words.
- Unless you are requested to do so, do not raise your voice. Do not shout.

- To facilitate speech reading, face into the light, and keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth.
- If the person is speech reading, face the person directly and maintain eye contact. Don't turn your back or walk around while talking. If you look away, the person might assume the conversation is over.
- While you are writing a message for someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, don't talk, since the person cannot read your note and lips at the same time.
- If you do not understand something said, ask the person to repeat it or to write it down. The goal is communication; do not pretend to understand if you do not.
- If you know any sign language, try using it. It may help you communicate, and it will at least demonstrate your interest and willingness in communicating.

SPEECH DISABILITIES

- Talk to people with speech disabilities as you would talk to anyone else.
- Be friendly; start up a conversation.
- Be patient; it may take the person a while to answer.
- Give the person your undivided attention.
- Ask the person for help in communicating with him or her. If the person uses a communication device such as a manual or electronic communication board, ask the person how best to use it.
- Speak in your regular tone of voice.
- Tell the person if you do not understand what he or she is trying to say. Ask the person to repeat the message, spell it, tell you in a different way, or write it.
- To obtain information quickly, ask short questions that require brief answers or a head nod. Try not to insult the person's intelligence with over-simplification.

KNOW THE LAW CONCERNING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Simply stated, the A.D.A. (Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990) includes:

A. Title I (Employment): Employers with 15 or more employees may not discriminate against qualified individuals with disabilities. Employers must reasonably accommodate the disabilities of qualified applicants or employees, including modifying workstations and equipment, unless undue hardship would result.

B. Title II (Public Services): State and local governments may not discriminate against qualified individuals with disabilities. This covers all public services, public employees, public facilities, and public transportation.

C. Title III (Public Accommodations): Restaurants, hotels, parks, malls, shopping centers, retail stores, libraries, private schools, day care centers, and other similar places of public accommodation, may not discriminate on the basis of disability. All public accommodations must be made accessible if it can be easily accomplished and carried out without much difficulty or expense.

D. Title IV (Telecommunication): Telephone companies must provide telecommunications relay services for hearing and speech-impaired individuals 24 hours a day.

The ADA does not cover housing nor provide special rights for people with disabilities. Steps aren't the only barriers facing people with disabilities. The **attitudes** of other people are sometime the toughest. Be sensitive about word choices such as "a normal person" when used in contrast to a person with a disability. You do not wish to

imply that people with disabilities are less normal or not normal. Cherish all the differences between us and help one another as we're all here together in the same boat. Live life to the fullest and treat people equally and fairly with compassionate understanding.

Examples of Preferred Terminology

Unacceptable

disabled person

blind person

deaf person

a hunchback or humpback

the disabled

dumb

he is crazy

retard, retarded

birth defect

fit

sick

patient

Acceptable

person with a disability

person who is blind or visually impaired

person who is deaf or hearing impaired

a person who has a curvature of the spine, or spinal curvature

the disabled community or people who are disabled

a person who has a speech or hearing impairment

he is mentally ill or has an emotional disability

a person who has mental retardation *or* a person with a developmental or cognitive impairment

a person who is disabled from birth, born with

seizure

use only when a person is actually physically ill

use only when a person is being seen by medical personnel

Other words that have negative connotations and tend to evoke pity include; cripple, abnormal, afflicted, burden, defect, deformity, invalid, imbecile, maimed, moron, spastic, stricken with, sufferer, victim.