



Disability Etiquette

[In this article, Disability Rights and Resources outlines appropriate behavior, conversational cues, and common courtesies to internalize and enact when spending time with a person with a disability.]

General Behavior

- A wheelchair, cane, or any other assistive device used to help a person with a disability is considered part of their personal space and should never be leaned on, picked up, or touched.
- When in doubt about offering assistance to a person with a disability, ask “may I help you with that” or “could you use a hand”? If they need help, they will accept it. If they do not, do not take offense. Maybe they are learning a new technique for completing a task, or maybe they just want to see if they can do it. NEVER just help without asking.
- Treat adults in a manner befitting adults, regardless of their disability. Call a person by his or her first name only when extending familiarity to all others present. Do not patronize people with disabilities by patting them on the head or hand, or by talking to them in baby talk. Reserve this sign of affection for children and pets.

Conversation

- Speak directly to a person with a disability, rather than through a companion who may be along.
- Relax. Don’t be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as “See you later” or “Got to be running along,” that seem to relate to the person’s disability.
- To get the attention of a person who has a hearing impairment, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and in a normal tone to establish if the person can read your lips. Not all people with hearing impairments can read lips. Those who do will rely on your facial expressions and other body language to help in understanding. Show consideration by facing the light source and keeping your hands and food away from your mouth when speaking. Shouting won’t help the person understand you, but you might ask if pen and paper would help.
- When talking to a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at the wheelchair user’s eye level to spare both of you a stiff neck. Grab a chair and sit with that person while you talk. Standing over someone in a wheelchair or of short stature causes you both to feel uncomfortable, as well as unnecessary back and neck pain.
- When greeting someone with a significant loss of vision, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. Say, for example, “On my right is John Miller.” When conversing in a group, remember to say the name of the person to whom you are speaking to give a vocal cue. Speak in a normal tone of voice, indicate when you move from one place to another, and let it be known when the conversation is at an end.
- Give whole, unhurried attention when you’re talking to a person who has difficulty speaking. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting. Be patient rather than try to speak for the person or fill in the gaps. When necessary, ask short questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having trouble doing so. Repeat what you understood. The person’s reaction will clue you in on whether you understood correctly. Don’t be afraid to ask them to repeat the parts you did not understand

Common Courtesies

- Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel like it, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help, and listen to any instructions the person may want to give to best help you both.
- When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, walking on crutches, or someone who uses a cane, please consider distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles such as stairs, curbs, and steep hills.
- Use specifics such as “go left a hundred feet” or “right two yards” when directing a person with a visual impairment.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking or talking.
- When planning events involving people with disabilities consider their needs ahead of time. If an insurmountable barrier exists, let them know about it prior to the event.

Portrayal

Never use the word “handicapped”. The word was first used in “Merry Olde London” to describe “cap in hand permits” that were granted for street begging. And most street beggars at that time were people with disabilities. We’ve come a long way in society and don’t want to be seen as pity cases. Still, we have further to go from here to become equal.

- Place the person **BEFORE** the disability out of respect for their individual uniqueness and worth. Use “person with a disability” or “my friend who uses a wheelchair” rather than “disabled person” or “disabled individual.”
- Because a person is not a condition, avoid referring to an individual by the condition he or she has, such as “post-polio, a C.P. or an epileptic.” Say, instead, a person who... “has/had polio,” “has cerebral palsy,” or “has spina bifida,” etc.
- When writing about people with disabilities, choose words that carry positive, nonjudgmental connotations. Avoid words such as the following:
 - **VICTIM** - Instead use “person who has/person who experienced/person with....”
 - **CRIPPLE/CRIPPLED/THE CRIPPLED** - Instead use “person with a disability/individual with a disability caused by or as a result of....”
 - **AFFLICTED BY/AFFLICTED WITH** - Instead use person has such and such disability.
 - **INVALID** - This word literally means “not valid”. Instead use “person who has a disability....”
 - **WHEELCHAIR BOUND** - Instead, “the person uses a wheelchair.”
 - **HOMEBOUND EMPLOYMENT** - Instead use “employed in the home”
 - **UNFORTUNATE, PITIFUL, POOR, DEAF AND DUMB, CRIP, DEFORMED, BLIND AS A BAT** and any other words or clichés that are judgmental or stereotyping. There are **NO** replacements for these.
- Remember to depict the typical achiever as well as the newsworthy achiever. Emphasize the uniqueness and worth of all individuals rather than the differences. Avoid using “normal” unless referring to statistical norms or averages, but not as a label for a person with a disability. The word “typical” is more widely accepted. What is normal anyway?

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