

Communicating with and About People with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), other legislation, and the efforts of many disability organizations have begun to improve accessibility in buildings, increase access to education, open employment opportunities, and develop realistic portrayals of persons with disabilities in television programming and motion pictures. However, more progress needs to be made. Many people still view persons with disabilities as individuals to be pitied, feared, or ignored. These attitudes may arise from discomfort with individuals who are perceived to be different or simply from a lack of information. Listed below are some suggestions on how to relate and communicate with and about people with disabilities. We must look beyond the disability and look at the individual's ability and capability--the things that make each of us unique and worthwhile.

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 deaf" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities. Following are examples of positive and negative phrases. Note that the positive phrases put the person first.

Affirmative Phrases

Negative Phrases

person with mental retardation	retarded, mentally defective
person who is blind, person who is visually impaired	the blind
person with a disability	the handicapped, crippled
person who is deaf, person who is hard of hearing	suffers a hearing loss, the deaf
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	person who has muscular dystrophy
physically disabled	crippled, lame, deformed
unable to speak, uses synthetic speech	dumb, mute
seizure	fit
successful, productive	has overcome her/his disability
person with psychiatric disability	crazy, nuts
person who no longer lives in an institution	the de-institutionalized
says she/he has a disability	admits she/he has a disability
person without a disability	normal person (implies that the person with a disability is not normal)

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Actions

Outlined below are the "Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities" to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities.

- When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.
- 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. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
- When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. (Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.)
- Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning on hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
- Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.
- When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
- To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seems to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

Source: The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

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For more information

To learn more about your rights and responsibilities as an employee or a supervisor, to request a reasonable accommodation, or to file a complaint of discrimination, please contact:

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This document can be made available in alternative formats such as Braille, large print, or audiotape upon request to the Office of Equity and Diversity Services at the numbers above.