



Communication Guide for Individuals with Disabilities



Introduction

Practicing disability etiquette is an easy way to make people with disabilities feel welcomed. You don't have to feel awkward when dealing with a person who has a disability. If you are unsure about what to do or say with a person who has a disability, just ask!

This resource guide has compiled several strategies for communicating with people with a range of disabilities. As you can see, they are not much different than rules for any communication. People with disabilities are people first and want to be treated like everyone else. Using the rules below will help your communications be effective and respectful.

Basic Rules for Communicating

- Treat everyone the way you would hope to be treated.
- Offer as much support and compassion as possible.
- Ask before you help.
- Be sensitive about physical contact.
- Think before you speak.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Respond graciously to requests.
- Use people first language. People first language puts the person before the disability. For example:
 - Say "people with disabilities" instead of "disabled or handicapped."
 - Say "s/he has autism" instead of "s/he is autistic."
 - Say "s/he has an intellectual disability or cognitive disability" instead of "s/he is mentally retarded."
 - Say "a person who uses a wheelchair" instead of "confined to a wheelchair."

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Deaf and Hard of Hearing

- Follow the person's cues: do they prefer sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking? When unsure, write it down or ask.
- The most effective way to communicate with a person who uses sign language is through a qualified sign language interpreter.

When using an interpreter:

- Never ask the interpreter not to interpret something.
- When using an interpreter, always talk directly to the person using first person singular pronouns, not to the interpreter.
- Position the interpreter so that you are both visible to the individual.
- Talk at a normal pace. The interpreter will ask you to slow down if s/he needs to.
- Communicate as though the interpreter was not present.
- Let her/him know if you have trouble understanding.
- Most people who are Hard of Hearing lip read people's lips. Speak clearly.
- In a group, have people raise a hand to speak so the person can identify the speaker.
- *Don't shout.* If the person uses a hearing aid, it will be calibrated to normal voice levels.



Blind and Low Vision

- Identify yourself before making contact with the person – include your name and your role.



- Always introduce the person to the others in a group.
- Don't touch the person's guide dog or cane.
- If the person puts the cane down, don't move it.
- If the person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the dog.
- Keep walkways clear of obstructions.
- Offer your arm – don't take theirs – if they need to be guided.
- If you are giving directions, give specific, nonvisual information.
- Offer to read written information.
- When speaking, use a normal tone, volume and pace; it is not necessary to

speak louder.

- Do not stop talking when the person with low vision is approaching you because they rely on the sound of your voice for direction.
- When leading the person to a chair, guide their hand to the back of the chair; do not try to help the person sit down.
- When walking, describe the setting, noting any obstacles, such as stairs ("up" or "down"), a big crack in the sidewalk, etc...
- If you need to leave, inform the person first and let them know where the exit is, then orient the person near a wall, table, or some other landmark.
- If you serve food, let the person know where everything is on the plate according to clock orientation (twelve o'clock is furthest from them, six o'clock is nearest).
- Someone who has low vision may need written material in large print.
- Lighting shouldn't be too bright.

Physical Disabilities

- Don't push, touch or lean on a person's wheelchair; it's part of their personal space.



- Provide assistance only if your help is requested.
 - Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked.
 - Be aware of reach limits of the person using a wheelchair. Place as many items as possible within their grasp.
 - Make sure there is a clear path of travel.
 - Know the location of wheelchair ramps, accessible restrooms, and elevators. If need be, allow the person in a wheelchair to use a private or employees' accessible restroom.
 - People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so never grab them.
- If you offer a seat to the person, chairs with arms or higher seats may be easier to use.
 - Be aware that people with a respiratory or heart condition may have trouble walking.
 - For people with limited use of their hands, wrists or arms, offer assistance with opening doors, reaching, grasping or lifting objects, operating vending machines and other equipment.

Cognitive Disabilities

- Be calm and patient, it will help the person to relax and be more comfortable communicating with you.
- People with cognitive disabilities may need more time to process information, instructions, or direction. You may need to repeat yourself often or explain things in a different approach.
- Speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple and concrete words. Help them understand a complex idea by breaking it down into smaller parts.
- Don't use baby talk or talk down to people.
- Gauge the pace, complexity, and vocabulary of your speech according to the person with a disability.
- Remember they are an adult and, unless you are informed that they have a legally appointed guardian, they can make their own decisions.
- Phrase questions in a neutral way. Verify responses by repeating each question in a different way.
- People with cognitive disabilities may tell you what they think you want to hear, to please you.
- Making quick decisions can be difficult. Be patient and allow the person to take their time.
- Many people with cognitive disabilities rely on routine and on the familiar to manage work and daily living. Be aware that a change in the environment or in a routine may require some attention, support, and patience.



Behavioral Health

- Maintain a supportive, open-minded attitude. The person will need to feel safe in order to work with you. Individuals who experience behavioral health issues may have a history of being ignored or not believed.
- Stress can affect the person's ability to function. Try to keep the pressure of the situation to a minimum by reducing extraneous stimulation such as noise, interruptions, and visual distractions.
- Ask what will make the situation more comfortable under the circumstances and make every attempt to accommodate the person's needs.
- Allow the presence of supportive persons (friends, family, or professionals) if requested and possible to help them to feel more comfortable and safe.
- Talk to the individual in a calm, nonthreatening, and reassuring manner. Help them feel they are in control of the situation.
- If the individual is taking any medications, make sure they have access to water, food, and toilet facilities because side effects of the medications may include thirst, urinary frequency, nausea, constipation, and diarrhea.



Neurological Disabilities

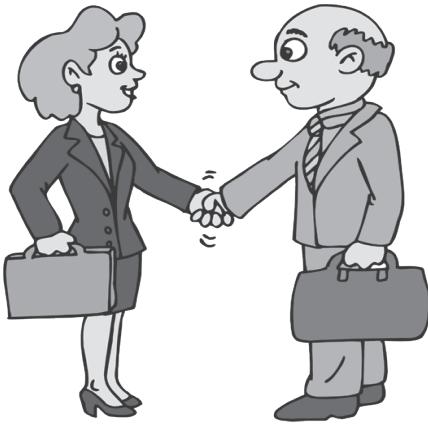
- Give the person your full attention.
- Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences.
- If you have trouble understanding, don't nod. Just ask them to repeat. In most cases the person won't mind and will appreciate your effort to hear what they have to say.
- If you are not sure whether you have understood, you can repeat for verification.
- Ask them to write it down or suggest another way of facilitating communication.
- A quiet environment makes communication easier.
- A person with neurological disabilities may have more difficulty with motor control when they are under stress.

Non-Apparent Disabilities

- Not all disabilities are "visible." Some disabilities are hidden or non-apparent.
 - Respect the person; ask what works best and if they have any particular needs.
 - Some people may experience Multiple Chemical Sensitivity or respiratory disabilities.
 - Avoid spray-cleaning tables, windows or other surfaces while people are in your place of business.
 - If you must use a spray product, spray or pour it closely into the cloth, not into the air.
 - Use less-toxic products when possible.
 - Request that staff go easy on fragranced body-care products like cologne, hair spray, hand lotion, and after-shave.
 - Conduct meetings and interviews in a room that has a window that opens and is well ventilated.



HIV/AIDS



- Persons with HIV or AIDS are at significant risk of picking up any infection.
- Many people with HIV/AIDS feel stigmatized.
- HIV/AIDS cannot be transmitted by casual contact such as shaking hands or hugging, so don't be afraid of physically interacting with a person who has HIV/AIDS.
- Use "Universal Precautions" protocol when interacting with any unknown persons.

Universal Precautions

A method of infection control—recommended by the CDC—in which all human blood, certain body fluids, as well as fresh tissues and cells of human origin are handled as if they are known to be infected with HIV, HBV, and/or other blood-borne pathogens.

The Precautions include specific recommendations for use of gloves, gowns, masks, and protective eyewear when contact with blood or body secretions containing blood is anticipated.

Source: Retrieved from <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Universal+Precautions> on June 19, 2014.

Learning Disabilities

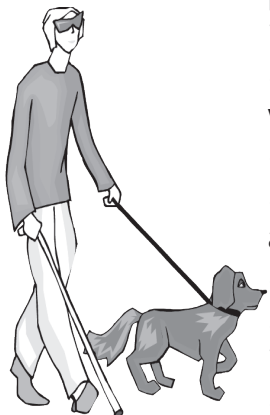
- People with dyslexia or other reading disabilities have trouble reading written information. Give them verbal explanations and allow extra time for reading.
- A person who has a learning disability, such as auditory processing disorder, may need information demonstrated or in writing, because spoken information gets "scrambled" just by listening to the speaker.
- Don't be surprised if you tell someone very simple instructions and you are requested to write them down.
- Minimize distractions in the environment, such as lighting, sounds, people, busy patterns on curtains.



A Word on Service Animals

What are service animals and what is the law regarding them?

- Service animal means any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability.
 - Service animals are required to be leashed or harnessed except when performing work or tasks where such tethering would interfere with the dog's ability to perform.
 - Service animals are exempt from breed bans as well as size and weight limitations.
 - Though not considered service animals, businesses are generally required to accommodate the use of miniature horses under specific conditions.
 - A service animal is not a pet. Do not call or touch them.
 - Often a service animal will be identifiable by special clothing or harnesses or have identification papers. But not always.
 - Businesses cannot require documentation before permitting a service animal.



Additional Resources

- *United Spinal Association* - A 36-page resource on how disability etiquette and how to interact and communicate with individuals with disabilities. <http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>
- *U.S. Department of Justice, ADA* - A 7-page publication on effective communication based on the Department of Justice's 2010 regulations. <http://www.ada.gov/effective-comm.htm>.
- *Department of Homeland Security* - A 9-page guide on how to interact and communicate with people who have disabilities. Explains common disability myths, and explains why they are false. Explains appropriate terminology, and why certain terms should not be used. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/guide-interacting-with-people-who-have-disabilities_09-26-13.pdf
- *North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities* - A 12-page guide on how to communicate more effectively with people who have a disability. Explains People First Language, respect and courtesy, and the Ten Commandments of Communication. <http://www.ndcpd.org/projects/medicaid/publications/pdf/Communicating.pdf>



2702 Gambell St., Ste.103, Anchorage, AK 99503
Phone: (907) 272-8270
Toll Free: (800) 243-2199
www.uaa.alaska.edu/chd