Tips When Meeting A Person Who Has A Disability

Many people find meeting someone with a disability to be an awkward experience because they are afraid they will say or do the wrong thing; perhaps you are one of them. A positive and receptive attitude is most important when learning to communicate with a person who has a disability. By reading this publication, you are demonstrating that!

We are all unique human beings with varying abilities and disabilities. Be natural and talk with a person who has a disability just as you would talk with anyone else. Don’t be patronizing in your questions or your actions. And don’t ask questions that you would not ask a person without a disability. Not everyone with a disability wishes to discuss their unique abilities or limitations. Wait until you know an individual before asking personal questions.

Remember that the person who has a disability is a person first, and should not be defined solely by his or her disability. Use person-first language when referring to someone who has a disability. Saying “a person who is blind” rather than “a blind person” puts the emphasis on the person and not the disability.

Don’t pre-judge a person’s abilities by their disabilities. Let him/her tell you if s/he can’t do something rather than assuming that s/he can’t. It is okay to ask if assistance is needed. Use your common sense here. If it looks like s/he needs help, offer it. As an example, offer assistance to guide a person who is blind in an unfamiliar environment or to push a wheelchair up a steep or slippery hill. Always wait until the assistance is accepted before providing it. The person who has a disability is the best source of information about their needs. Rely on them to provide you with information about what is helpful and what is not.

Below is information about communication methods and tips for communicating with individuals with specific disabilities.

When meeting a person who is blind:

Identify yourself by name and association when you approach a person who is blind. Let the person know if you are leaving the room or moving to a different location during a conversation.
Let that person take your arm rather than taking his/hers when guiding a person who is blind.

When helping to seat a person who is blind, place his/her hand on the back side of the chair so s/he can judge its position.

Go ahead and use words like “see” and “look.” Everyone uses these descriptors, even people who can’t actually “see” or “look.”

Never pet, feed or otherwise distract a guide dog without first getting permission from the owner.

If asked directions, be very specific and don’t simply point. Avoid using terms such as “over there” or “turn that way.”

Avoid clutter. Keep things in standard places.

Be specific in your descriptions. Saying “The four-inch rod moves to the left,” is better than “This moves over here.”

**When meeting a person who is deaf or has a hearing impairment:**

Be sure you have the person’s attention before you begin to communicate. Wave your hand, stomp on the floor or tap a person on the shoulder to gain attention.

Use gestures, body language and facial expressions to aid in communication.

Find out how you can communicate best by asking. Some people who are deaf read lips (speechreading). Others use sign language. Don’t forget that writing can also be a good way to communicate.

When you are having difficulty communicating, ask the individual for suggestions to improve communication.

In a discussion where one person is deaf, be sure there is only one person speaking at a time. It is very difficult to speechread or to interpret when more than one person is speaking, or when people are interrupting each other.

Be sure you have the attention of the person who has a hearing impairment before you begin talking.

Look directly at the person who has a hearing impairment and don’t obscure your mouth. Speak with a normal tone and speed unless asked to do otherwise.
If giving a presentation, or speaking with a group, repeat all questions before answering them.

Speechreading

Speechreading is a game of anticipation and guessing. Some people are easier to speechread than others. When someone is speechreading your lips,

Do not have objects in your mouth such as gum, cigarettes or food.

Look directly at the person who is deaf. Don’t obscure your mouth. Speak with a normal tone and speed unless asked to do otherwise.

Mirror the language they are using (repeat statements) and avoid jargon if possible.

Re-phrase using different words when you are not understood. For example, the word “doctor” is easier to speechread than “physician.”

Avoid noisy background situations

Using Sign Language:

If you know Sign Language, use it! Even if your skills are not high, your attempts will most likely be supported and appreciated. When communicating in Sign Language,

If you don’t understand what the person is signing to you, let him/her know rather than nodding and giving him/her the impression you understand.

Be aware of the lighting in the room. Make sure you are in good light so the person can see you clearly. Avoid standing directly in front of a light source.

Do not walk between two people using Sign Language; otherwise, you will interrupt their conversation.

Working with a Sign Language Interpreter:

Sometimes a person who is deaf is accompanied by a Sign Language Interpreter. When this is the case,

Speak directly to the deaf person. The interpreter is there to bridge the gap of communication, and there is no reason to ask the interpreter to “Tell him this . . .”. Speak normally as you would to any other person, and leave the rest to the interpreter.
Remember that the interpreter is required to sign everything you say, including anything you say directly to the interpreter. Don’t ask an interpreter to omit anything you have said.

Do not expect the interpreter to be a participant in the meeting or situation. The interpreter is there to facilitate communication, not to participate in the conversation.

During an oral presentation where a person who is deaf is in the audience, the interpreter should be positioned near the speaker so the person who is deaf can see both the speaker and the interpreter simultaneously.

Note that interpreters must follow a strict code of ethics. Interpreters are not to share information that is discussed while they have been interpreting.

**When meeting a person who is deaf-blind:**

If you know how to use sign language or fingerspelling, use it. If you do not, or an interpreter is not available, you can print capital letters with your index finger in the palm of the person’s hand. Be sure to pause between each word.

Offer your arm when walking with a person who is deaf-blind. Pause briefly before going up or down stairs so s/he knows the terrain is about to change.

When helping to seat person who is deaf-blind, place his/her hand on the back side of the chair so s/he can judge its position.

**When meeting a person who uses a wheelchair:**

If engaged in a long conversation, try to position yourself at the same eye level as the person in the wheelchair.

Talk in a normal tone of voice.

Don’t lean or sit on the person’s wheelchair. The chair is a part of his personal space.

Offer assistance if it makes sense (e.g., opening the door, moving something out of the way), but wait until it is accepted before you begin assisting.

It’s acceptable to say things such as “walk this way.”

Be aware of the space needs for people who use wheelchairs. Avoid clutter.

Be aware of where accessible bathroom facilities are located. However, do not offer this information unless you are asked.
Direct all questions to the person directly rather than asking his/her attendant or another person who is with him/her.

**When meeting someone who has a developmental or cognitive disability:**

Respond to an adult with a developmental disability as an adult, not a child. If his name is Robert, don’t call him Bobby.

You may need to repeat directions. Break down components of a task or job into small components that can be easily remembered.

Be patient. Change in atmosphere or environment can be difficult for a person with a cognitive or developmental disability.

**When meeting someone who has a speech impairment:**

Be patient and listen closely. Ask the individual to repeat statements you do not understand. In most cases, the person would rather have you ask for clarification rather than to misunderstand.

Some people use an augmentative communication device to assist them in speaking. An augmentative communication device can be a computer, a picture- or symbol-board, or an alphabet-board where the person communicates by pointing to the spelling of a word. When talking with someone who uses a communication device, ask one question at a time. This way you will know what question they are answering when they respond to you. Speak to the person using an augmentative communication device in a normal voice, with normal strength, and tone.

**When meeting someone who has a hidden disability:**

Remember that not all disabilities are visible.

Conditions such as heart disease, epilepsy, dyslexia, Attention Deficit Disorder, a psychological disability, and asthma may not be obvious. Hidden disabilities may affect a person in a variety of ways. A hidden disability may affect a person’s ability to read quickly or aloud, focus on more than one task at a time, maintain stamina, sit or stand for any length of time, grasp or manipulate items, concentrate, or tolerate strong odors including perfume, cleaning products, and cigarette smoke. Just because you can’t see a person’s disability doesn’t mean s/he doesn’t have one. Keep this in mind if you see someone who has a disability-parking permit or license plate decal and is parking in a disabled space but does not have a visible disability.