

Disability Etiquette

As children, we are curious – pointing to anything unfamiliar and asking questions. We have few, if any, inhibitions. As adults, we learn to censor our queries, feeling uncomfortable with anything unfamiliar. This is true when we are faced with new technologies. It is true when we are faced with tackling new projects for which we may not feel prepared. It is often true when we meet people who speak a different language or come from a different culture.

It is human nature and not unusual, therefore, to be concerned about interactions with people who use wheelchairs, who are blind, who are deaf, or whom we find difficult to understand. We may be concerned that we will say the wrong thing, ask an inappropriate question, or unintentionally offend. We do not want to appear uninformed or insensitive.

Tips for Speaking or Writing about People with Disabilities A key to any effective communication is to focus on the communication itself – what information needs to be transmitted and how best to transmit it. Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first – to focus on the person, not the disability. Group designations, such as “the blind,” “the deaf” or “the disabled” are not empowering. It is important to use words that reflect individuality, equality or dignity – the person who is blind, the child who is deaf, the individual with a disability, for example.

Following are examples of appropriate and inappropriate phrases to describe persons with disabilities.

Glossary of Acceptable Terms

Acceptable Terms	Unacceptable Terms
Person with a disability.	Cripple or cripples. The image conveyed is of a twisted, deformed, or useless body.
Disability, a general term used for functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, lift etc. It may refer to a physical, mental or sensory condition.	Handicap, handicapped person, or handicapped.
People with cerebral palsy or people with spinal cord injuries.	Cerebral palsied, spinal cord injured, etc. Never identify people solely by their disability.
People who had a spinal cord injury, polio, stroke, etc., or a person who has multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, etc.	Victim. People with disabilities do not like to be perceived as victims for the rest of their lives, long after any victimization has occurred.
Has a disability, has a condition of (spinal bifida, etc.), or born without legs, etc.	Defective, defect, deformed, or vegetable. These words are offensive, dehumanizing, degrading and

Acceptable Terms	Unacceptable Terms
	stigmatizing.
Deafness or hearing impairment. Deafness refers to a person who has a total loss of hearing. Hearing impairment refers to a person who has a partial loss of hearing within a range from slight to severe. Hard of hearing describes a hearing impaired person who communicates through speaking and speech-reading, and who usually has listening and hearing abilities adequate for ordinary telephone communication. Many hard of hearing individuals use a hearing aid.	Deaf and dumb is as bad as it sounds. The inability to hear or speak does not indicate intelligence.
People who have a mental or developmental disability.	Retarded, moron, imbecile, or idiot. These are offensive to people who bear the label.
Use a wheelchair or crutches, a wheelchair user, or walks with crutches.	Confined or restricted to a wheelchair, or wheelchair bound. Most people who use a wheelchair or mobility devices do not regard them as confining. They are viewed as liberating; a means of getting around.
Able-bodied, able to walk, see, hear, etc., or people who are not disabled.	Healthy, when used to contrast with "disabled." Healthy implies that the person with a disability is unhealthy. Many people with disabilities have excellent health.
People who do not have a disability.	Normal, when used as the opposite of disabled. This implies that the person is abnormal; no one wants to be labeled as abnormal.
A person who has (name of disability).	<p>Afflicted with or suffers from. Most people with disabilities do not regard themselves as afflicted or suffering continually.</p> <p>Afflicted: a disability is not an affliction.</p>

More Acceptable Terms:

Use:	Instead of:	Because:
Persons with Disabilities	The Handicapped	Handicapped is derived from "cap in hand" and implies that someone is dependent on society.
Persons with Disabilities	The Disabled	One is a person before one is disabled.
Uses a Wheelchair or Wheelchair User	Wheelchair Bound, Confined to a Wheelchair	A wheelchair is not confining- it allows movement from one place to another.
Congenital Disability	Birth Defect	Persons with disabilities are not defective.
Has a Disability	Crippled	Crippled comes from Old English "to creep" and is also used as an adjective meaning inferior.
Persons with Down Syndrome	Mongoloid	Mongoloid is a racist term.
Person with Mental Illness	Mental, Crazy, Psycho, Insane, Nut Case	These are offensive and negative stereotypes.
Non-Disabled	Normal, Healthy, Whole	People with disabilities may also be normal, healthy, and whole.
Person who is Deaf or a Person who Does Not Speak	Deaf and Dumb, Deaf-Mute	Simply because someone is deaf does not mean they cannot speak, and they are not dumb.

Social Etiquette

Use a normal tone of voice when extending a verbal welcome. Do not raise your voice unless requested.

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 acceptable. For those who cannot shake hands, touch the person on the shoulder or arm to welcome and acknowledge their presence.

When addressing a person who uses a wheelchair, never lean on the person's wheelchair. The chair is part of the space that belongs to the person who uses it.

When talking with a person with a disability, look at and speak directly to that person rather than through a companion who may be along. Address a person by their first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present.

Never patronize people using wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.

If an interpreter is present, speak to the person who has scheduled the appointment, not to the interpreter. Always maintain eye contact with the applicant, not the interpreter.

Offer assistance in a dignified manner with sensitivity and respect. Be prepared to have the offer declined. Do not proceed to assist if your offer to assist is declined. If the offer is accepted, listen to or accept instructions. Allow a person with a visual impairment to take your arm (at or about the elbow.) This will enable you to guide rather than propel or lead the person. Offer to hold or carry packages in a welcoming manner (e.g. "May I help you with your packages?") When offering to hand a coat or umbrella, do not offer to hand a cane or crutches unless the individual requests otherwise.

Service Animal Etiquette

Over 12,000 people with disabilities use the aid of service animals. Although the most familiar types of service animals are guide dogs used by people who are blind, service animals assist persons who have other disabilities as well. Many disabling conditions are invisible. Therefore, every person who is accompanied by a service animal may or may not "look" disabled. A service animal is not required to have any special certification. A service animal is not a pet.

Do not touch the service animal, or the person it assists, without permission. Do not make noises at the service animal; it may distract the animal from doing its job. Do not feed the service animal, it may disrupt their schedule. Do not be offended if the person does not feel like discussing their disability or the assistance the service animal provides.

Sign Language Interpreters Etiquette

The professional interpreter is always considered as an extension of, and part of, the event. Interpreters are part of the team meant to deliver accurate and intended messages given by the presenters or performers.

The more advance notice provided to the interpreter is the more prepared they will be. This process allows the interpreter to prepare for the event and prevent "cold" interpreting. Time for preparation is essential to allow accurate dissemination of the intended messages to the audience.

People using Mobility Aids

Enable people who use crutches, canes or wheelchairs to keep them within reach.

Be aware that some wheelchair users may choose to transfer themselves out of their wheelchairs.

When speaking to a person in a wheelchair or on crutches for more than a few minutes, sit in a chair. Place yourself at that person's eye level to facilitate conversation.

People with Vision Impairments

When greeting a person with vision impairment always identify yourself and introduce anyone else who might be present.

If the person does not extend their hand to shake hands, verbally extend a welcome.

When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat. A verbal cue is helpful as well.

Let the person know if you move or need to end the conversation.

People with Speech Impairments

Give your whole attention when talking to a person who has speech impairment.

Do not pretend to understand if you do not. Try rephrasing what you wish to communicate, or ask the person to repeat what you do not understand.

Do not raise your voice. Most speech impaired persons can hear and understand.

People who are Deaf, Deafened, or Hard of Hearing

If you need to attract the attention of a person who is deaf or hearing impaired, touch them lightly on the shoulder.

If the person lip-reads, look directly at them. Speak clearly at a normal pace. Do not exaggerate your lip movements or shout. Speak expressively because the person will rely on your facial expressions, gestures and eye contact.

Place yourself in a light source and keep your hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

Shouting does not help and can be detrimental. Only raise your voice when requested. Brief, concise written notes may be helpful.

Most deaf people use American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is not a universal language; it is a language with its own syntax and grammatical structure. When scheduling an interpreter for a non-English speaking person, be certain to retain an interpreter that speaks and interprets in the language of the person.

Further Information

Disability Etiquette Handbook, City of San Antonio Planning Department
(http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/disability_handbook/disability_handbook.asp?res=1024&ver=true)

Disability Etiquette, Memphis Centre for Independent Living,
(<http://www.mcil.org/mcil/mcil/etiqu01.htm>)

United Spinal Association (<http://www.unitedspinal.org/pages.php?catid=7&pageid=472>)