

**PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

Interacting with people with disabilities is something that you may encounter at least once in your professional career. It is best to read ahead on the proper etiquette so as to avoid offending someone. Not all long-term disabilities are obvious; people who suffer from a particular ailment may appear in the best of health to the casual observer. Always remember that a person with a disability is like anyone else, except for the special limitations of their disability.



## Distinction Between Disability and Handicap

A **disability** is a condition caused by an accident, trauma, genetics or disease which may limit a person's mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function. Some people with disabilities have one or more disabilities.

A **handicap** is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines handicap as to put at a disadvantage.

**Example:** Some people with disabilities use wheelchairs. Stairs, narrow doorways and curbs are handicaps imposed upon people with disabilities who use wheelchairs.

### People with disabilities have all manner of disabling conditions:

Mobility impairments

Blindness and vision impairments

Deafness and hearing impairments

Speech and language impairments

Psychological/psychiatric and learning disabilities

Physical and health impairments

Source: [https://www.gsc.edu/studev/disability/disability\\_etiquette\\_101.htm](https://www.gsc.edu/studev/disability/disability_etiquette_101.htm).

## Disability Etiquette

The following are tips on interacting with people with disabilities:

- Ask before you help. Don't assume that all disabled people need help. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has gone a long way to make public areas more accessible and less assistance is required today than in the past.
- Be sensitive about physical contact. Many disabled people use their arms for balance and grabbing them could cause them to falter or fall. Also, refrain from touching wheelchairs, scooters, canes, etc., as people who are disabled view these objects as extensions of themselves.
- Think before you speak. Address the person with the disability, not a companion. Talk to them as you would anyone else but also respect their privacy.
- Remember, not all long-term disabilities are obvious. People who suffer from emphysema, post polio distress, multiple sclerosis and other ailments may appear in the best of health to the casual observer.

Source: Sharon Tabor Warren, [www.suite101.com/article.cfm/golden\\_years/44415](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/golden_years/44415).



## Reception Etiquette to Persons With Disabilities

Know where accessible restrooms, drinking fountains and telephones are located. If such facilities are not available, be ready to offer alternatives, such as the private or employee restroom, a glass of water or your desk phone.

Use a normal tone of voice when extending a verbal welcome. Do not raise the volume of 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.

Treat adults in a manner befitting adults.

Call a person by his or her first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present.

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

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.

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

contact with that person, 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.

Source: Gainesville State College, Disability Services, [https://www.gsc.edu/studev/disability/disability\\_etiquette\\_101.htm](https://www.gsc.edu/studev/disability/disability_etiquette_101.htm).



## Disability Etiquette 101

### Sensitivity to Blindness and Visual Impairments:

The following points of etiquette are helpful to keep in mind when interacting with a person who is blind or visually impaired.

- Introduce yourself to people who are blind or visually impaired using your name and/or position.
- Speak directly to people who are blind or visually impaired, not through a companion, guide or other individual.
- Speak to people who are blind or visually impaired using a natural conversational tone and speed.
- Address people who are completely blind or severely visually impaired by name when possible, especially in crowded areas.
- Immediately greet people who are blind or visually impaired when they enter a room or a service area. This allows you to let them know you are present and ready to assist.
- Indicate the end of a conversation with a person who is completely blind or severely visually impaired to avoid the embarrassment of having them continue speaking when no one is actually there.
- Feel free to use words that refer to vision during the course of conversations with people who are blind or visually impaired. Vision-oriented words such as look, see and watching TV are a part of everyday verbal communication.

- Be precise and thorough when you describe individuals, places or things to people who are completely blind. Don't leave things out or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant. It is also important to refer to specific people or items by name or title instead of general terms like "you" or "they" or "this."
- Feel free to use visually-descriptive language. Making reference to colors, patterns, designs and shapes is perfectly acceptable.
- Offer to guide people who are blind or visually impaired by asking if they would like assistance. Offer them your arm. It is not always necessary to provide guided assistance; in some instances it can be disorienting and disruptive.
- Guide people who request assistance by allowing them to take your arm just above the elbow when your arm is bent. Walk ahead of the person you are guiding. *Never grab a person who is blind or visually impaired by the arm and push him/her forward.*
- Guide dogs are working mobility tools. Do not pet them, feed them or distract them while they are working.
- Do not leave a person who is blind or visually impaired standing in "free space" when you serve as a guide. Always be sure that the person you guide has a firm grasp on your arm, or is leaning against a chair or a wall if you have to be separated momentarily.
- Be calm and clear about what to do if you see a person who is blind or visually impaired about to encounter a dangerous situation.

### Interacting with people who have speech disabilities:

There is a variety of disabilities, such as stroke, cerebral palsy and deafness, that may involve speech impairments. People with speech disabilities communicate in many different ways.

- People who have speech disabilities may use a variety of ways to communi-

cate. The individual may choose to use American Sign Language, write, speak, use a communication device or a combination of methods. Find out the person's preferred method and use it.

- Be appropriate when speaking with a person with a speech disability. Never assume that the person has a cognitive disability just because he or she has difficulty speaking.
- Move away from a noisy source and try to find a quiet environment for communicating with the person.
- If the person with a speech disability has a companion or attendant, talk directly to the person. Do not ask the companion about the person.
- Listen attentively when you are 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.
- If you do not understand what the person has said, do not pretend that you did. Ask the person to repeat it, or repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- When you have difficulty conversing on the telephone with the person, suggest the use of a speech-to-speech relay service so that a trained professional can help you communicate with the person. Either you or the person can initiate the call free of charge via the relay service.
- If the person uses a communication device, make sure it is within his or her reach. If there are instructions visible for communicating with the person, take a moment to read them.
- Do not make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do based on his disability. All people with disabilities are different and have a wide variety of skills and personalities.

Source: The University of Texas at Arlington, [www.uta.edu/uac/file\\_download/118](http://www.uta.edu/uac/file_download/118).

## Using Words With Dignity

### Do Not Use:

- Handicap
- The handicapped
- Crippled with
- Victim
- Spastic
- Patient (except in hospital)
- Invalid
- Paralytic
- Stricken with

### Words with Dignity:

- Physically disabled
- Person with a disability
- Person who has multiple sclerosis
- Person who has muscular dystrophy
- Paraplegic (person with limited or no use of lower limbs)
- Quadriplegic (person with limited or no use of all four limbs)
- Person who has cerebral palsy
- Person who had polio
- Person with mental retardation
- Person with mental disability
- Person who is blind
- Person who has a speech impairment
- Person with a learning disability

### Do Not Use:

- Birth defect
- Inflicted
- Afflicted/afflicted by
- Deformed/deformed by
- Incapacitated
- Poor
- Unfortunate

### Words with Dignity:

- Caused by "\_\_\_\_\_"
- Disabled since birth
- Born with "\_\_\_\_\_"

### Do Not Use:

- Deaf and dumb
- Deaf mute

### Words with Dignity:

- Deaf person
- Pre-lingually (deaf at birth) deaf
- Post-lingually (deaf after birth) deaf
- Deaf/profoundly deaf (no hearing capability)
- Hearing-impaired (some hearing capability)

### Do Not Use:

- Confined to a wheelchair
- Restricted to a wheelchair
- Wheelchair bound

### Words with Dignity:

- Person in a wheelchair
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person who walks with crutches

### Do Not Use:

- Normal (acceptable only for quoting statistics)

### Words with Dignity:

- Non-disabled (referring to non-disabled persons as normal insinuates that disabled persons are abnormal)

Source: Community Resources for Independence, [www.crinet.org/dignity.php](http://www.crinet.org/dignity.php).

## Overall Attitude and Approach to Persons with Disabilities

As you meet people with various physical disabilities, you will likely find that you are apprehensive about how you should behave toward that individual. Every person is different and some will find it easy to work with such individuals, whereas others will find it difficult adjusting to working with people with physical disabilities. Always remember that a person with a disability is a person. He or she is like anyone else, except for the special limitations of their disability.

### The most important thing is to be honest.

If you do not understand someone because they have difficulty with their speech, or they use some form of communication aid, please do not assume that they do not understand. If you have difficulty understanding them, then admit it, and try to get someone to translate for you. People in such situations will not get upset if you are honest, and in time, you will learn to understand what they are saying to you.

### How to help:

- Introduce yourself and offer assistance.
- Don't be offended if your help is not needed.
- Be courteous, but NOT condescending.
- Allow a person DIGNITY to do what he or she wants to do for him or herself.

### Things to remember:

- Treat people as you would like to be treated yourself.
- Do not show pity for a person in a wheelchair. It makes them feel demoralized.
- People with disabilities are NOT all alike.
- Most disabled people are not sick, incompetent, dependent, unintelligent or contagious.

### When you meet a non-vocal person:

- Some non-vocal people prefer to write their communications down on paper, some use sign-language and some use a sign board. These methods can be slow and require patience and concentration. You may have to handle much of the conversation yourself.
- Try to keep in mind that communication is the important thing.
- You might try using more yes/no questions.
- If possible, fill in the gaps when you can so the non-vocal person will need to expend less energy getting the message across.

### Suggestions for communicating with people using communication aides:

- Expect non-verbal people to communicate.
- Ask the person to show how they indicate "yes." Once you have noted this, ask them how they indicate "no."
- Find out if they:
  - Feel like talking to you.
  - Have the time to talk with you.
- Find out how the person "points" (with their finger, eyes, fist, etc.).
- Ask one question at a time.
- Ask open-ended, rather than yes/no questions, whenever appropriate.
- Wait for a response.

Source: Community Resources for Independence, [www.crinet.org/interact.php](http://www.crinet.org/interact.php).

