

Disability Etiquette Tips

Individuals who use Wheelchairs:

- A person's wheelchair is part of his or her body space and should be treated with respect. Don't hang or lean on it unless you have the person's permission.
- Speak directly to the person and if the conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit down or kneel to get yourself on the same level as the person in the wheelchair.
- Don't worry about using expressions such as "running along" or "walked away" when speaking to a person in a wheelchair. These sayings are used in everyday conversation and are not offensive.
- Wheelchair use provides freedom. Don't assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy. It is a means of freedom, which allows the person to move about independently. Structural barriers in public places create inconveniences for wheelchair users. You can help by advocating for wheelchair access.
- When giving wheelchair users directions, be aware of architectural barriers such as narrow doorways, stairs, curbs, etc.
- When a person transfers out of the wheelchair to a chair, toilet, car or other object, do not move the wheelchair out of reaching distance. Some people who use a wheelchair for mobility can walk with aid, such as braces, walkers, or crutches. They use wheelchairs some of the time to conserve energy and move about more quickly.
- Don't classify persons who use wheelchairs as sick. Although wheelchairs are often associated with hospitals, they are used more frequently to help people with mobility disabilities get around their home, work and community.
- Relationships are Important. Have eye and physical contact with chair users in the same respectful manner you would a person that isn't in a wheelchair.

Individuals who have Speech Disabilities:

- Give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has difficulty speaking.
- Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
- Rather than speak for the person, allow extra time for the conversation and be patient. Do not finish a person's sentence.
- If you have difficulty understanding, don't pretend that you do. Repeat as much as you do understand. The person's reaction will guide you and clue you in.

- Ask the person what is the best way to communicate (i.e. write or type their message, point to pictures or the alphabet).

Individuals who have Cognitive/Language Disabilities:

- Use a calm voice and be reassuring. Use short sentences and simple, concrete words.
- Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
- May be sensitive to tone of voice.
- Don't rush, trust is built slowly.
- You should treat adults as adults.
- Encourage self-advocacy and opportunities for autonomy.
- Treat each person as an individual with talents and abilities deserving of respect and dignity. Individuals can usually tell if they are being talked down to like a child, which can make a situation worse.
- Give extra time for the person to process what you are saying and to respond. Look for signs of stress and/or confusion.

Individuals who have Mental Health Disabilities:

- Listen and pay attention. Pay attention to both to verbal communication (words) and nonverbal communication (voice quality and body language).
- Acknowledge the person's feelings and express care and concern (e.g. "You seem nervous" or "You seem sad.")
- Validate the person's feelings. Acknowledge that the person's feelings are understandable (e.g. "I can see how you might feel that way"). This is not the same as agreeing with the person's reactions.
- Ask the person what may have caused the feelings.
- Do not use psychological terminology/jargon.
- Ask about social supports – family, friends, community, faith, etc. Find out what helped them in the past.
- Remind them that they deserve to feel better.

- Empower the individual. Encourage them to think about their personal strengths, their individual gifts/talents, and their value as a human being.

Individuals who have a Hearing Disability, such as hearing loss or deafness:

- Hearing aids do not guarantee that the person can hear and understand speech. They increase volume, not necessarily clarity.
- Get the person's attention with a wave of the hand, or a tap on the shoulder. Move away from background noise.
- Speak clearly and slowly, but without exaggerating your lip movements or shouting. Be flexible in your language. If the person experiences difficulty understanding what you are saying, switch the words around and rephrase your statement rather than keep repeating. If difficulty persists, write down what you are saying.
- Many people who have hearing loss read lips. Place yourself facing the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when talking in order to provide a clear view of your face.
- When an interpreter accompanies a person, direct your remarks to the person rather than to the interpreter.
- Look directly at the person and speak expressively. The person who has a significant hearing loss will rely on your facial expressions, gestures, and body movements to assist in understanding. Use sign language if you and the person are both familiar with it. Ask what the person prefers.

Individuals who have a Vision Disability, such as vision loss or blindness:

- People with visual impairments do not necessarily hear better than others or have ultra-developed sense of touch. They may have trained their other senses to assist them with mobility, etc.
- When you enter a room, indicate who you are. Let the person know when you are leaving the room. When talking to a person with a visual impairment, begin by identifying yourself and that you are speaking to them.
- When offering your assistance, do not grab a person's cane or arm; this can be very disorienting for the person. If you are walking with a person who is blind, offer your arm for them to hold. The person may feel most comfortable walking a half step behind. Walk at your normal pace. It is helpful to speak casually and naturally about the terrain, objects and buildings you are passing as you walk. Stop for curbs and steps; let the person know if he or she should step up or down. Once you have indicated up or down, proceed and they will follow.
- Don't worry about using words such as "see" or "look" in your conversation. These words are a part of everyday conversation and are not offensive.

- Not all visually impaired people read Braille. Ask the person what alternative format they prefer.
- Do not pet a guide dog unless you have been given permission – these dogs are working and they need to concentrate.
- Remember that you'll need to communicate any written information orally.

Individuals who have Multiple Chemical Sensitivities:

- Reassure the person that you understand he or she is chemically sensitive and that you will work with him or her in providing care. Be sure to ask what the person is sensitive to, including his or her history of reactions to various drugs you may have to administer.
- Whenever seeking care at a facility, such as a hospital, it is beneficial for a person with multiple chemical sensitivity to take his or her own medical supplies and equipment with them, including oxygen mask and tubing, medications, food and water, bedding, clothing and soap – he or she may be sensitive to these items if issued at a shelter or hospital.
- Avoid placing the person in rooms with recent pesticide sprays, strong scented products like disinfectants, cleaners, scented candles and room fresheners, new paint or carpet, or other recent remodeling.
- Allow the person to wear a mask or respirator, use an air filter, or open a window as needed.
- Consider how your actions may affect the access of others. For some of us, the fragrances we wear have deep personal, religious, or cultural significance. With dialogue, we can find creative ways to deal with the fact that what is empowering to one is dangerous to another. However, if someone moves away from you or asks you to move, don't be offended – please realize this person just needs to breathe, and honor his or her request. Dialogue is not possible during moments of immediate physical distress.
- Don't wear any scented products to events that specify "no perfume" or "no fragrance" or similar notice. This means, as much as possible, try to avoid the following:
 - Perfume, cologne, aftershave, scented or essential oils.
 - Scented lotions, moisturizers, deodorants, or cosmetics.
 - Hairspray, gel, or mousse.
 - Deodorant (scented), sanitary napkins, or tampons.
 - Clothing that has been recently washed in scented detergent/fabric softener OR that has been dry-cleaned OR that has been worn near smoke, fragrance, or petrochemicals.

- Make events you host fragrance-free. Post on flyers, brochures, websites, and event registration forms that your event is fragrance-free and ask participants to avoid wearing scented products to the event.
- Beware that “natural” or “unscented” do not necessarily mean they are safe. “Natural” can mean anything – it is an unregulated word and “unscented” may mean the product contains an additional (toxic) masking fragrance to cover other odors.

Additional Suggestions:

- Don't discourage children from asking questions about disabilities. Children have a natural curiosity that needs to be satisfied so they do not develop fearful or misleading attitudes. Most people are not offended by questions children ask them about their disabilities or personal assistive devices.
- Remember that the person who has a disability is a person like anyone else.
- Appreciate and emphasize what the person can do.
- Encourage the person who has a disability to express his or her own thoughts, even if others try to speak for that person. It may take longer for the person to answer on his or her own, or with an assistive communication device.
- Always ask if a person who has a disability needs help or assistance before assuming that she does. Many people who have disabilities are very independent and are capable of helping others. If you offer assistance to a person who has a disability and he or she says "no thanks", respect that the person has the ability to handle the situation without assistance. If someone asks for your assistance, and you are uncertain how to assist, ask the person to explain the best way for you to assist them.