

Preferred Etiquette with People with disabilities/impairments

People are people. Everybody's fighting some kind of stereotype, and so called "people with disability" are no exception. The difference is that people with disabilities face barriers that begin with people's attitudes — attitudes often rooted in misinformation and misunderstandings about what it's like to live with a "disability". While we tend to differentiate ourselves from others, we are all a lot more alike than we are different. We are moving toward understanding that "disability" is a natural part of life, because, let's face it, sooner or later we will all face some "disabling" condition(s). In line with the World Health Organization, we are moving away from using the term "disability." This word reflects an interaction between features of a person's body and features of society and normally infers that you are unable to do something.

When referring to a loss in body function or structure, or activity limitation, the term "impairment" is now preferred when describing people. This shifts the focus more onto a person's abilities and what they are able to achieve. Being "normal" does not mean being "able bodied," since we all face illness and impairments as a "normal" part of life. What does "normal" really mean anyway? You can walk, have brown hair and wear glasses? We are moving toward "people first" language, which in this case, would mean referring to a person with an "impairment" vs. a "disabled person." So i.e., a "person with a physical impairment," a "person who uses a wheelchair," a "person with blindness," or a "person with hearing loss," is preferable to "a quad, the blind, the deaf, the disabled." In general, it is helpful to remember that impairment is a characteristic or a situation of life but does not replace life itself. Life very often proves to be stronger than any kind of impairment.

General rules

When speaking, interviewing or socializing with a person with an impairment, here are a few general rules to remember:

- Always identify the person first and then the impairment. Sometimes it may not be necessary or relevant to mention the impairment at all, so don't feel obliged to do so. Question yourself about the reason for mentioning it. When it is relevant, just mention what the impairment is and then move on.
- Speak naturally and don't monitor every word and action. Don't be embarrassed if you use common expressions like "see you later" (to a person with a visual impairment) or "I'd better run along" (to someone who uses a wheelchair).
- Avoid using emotional wording like "tragic", "afflicted", "victim", or "confined to a wheelchair". Emphasize the ability and not the limitation, i.e. by saying that someone "uses a wheelchair" rather than "is confined" or "is wheelchair-bound". A wheelchair, just like eyeglasses, is a personal assistive device that enables someone to get around.

- Avoid portraying people with an impairment who succeed as “extraordinary” or “superhuman”. Overstating achievements as extraordinary inadvertently suggests the original expectations were not very high. Adjusting to an impairment requires adapting to a lifestyle, not bravery and courage.
- Portray or refer to the person as he/she is in real life.
- People do not want to be recipients of charity or pity. Remember that a person with an impairment isn’t necessarily chronically sick or unhealthy.
- Always ask a person with an impairment if he/she would like assistance before rushing in. Your help may not be needed, or wanted. However, it is quite all right to offer help. If your assistance is needed then listen or ask for instructions.
- When talking with a person who has an impairment, speak directly to that person rather than a companion or interpreter.
- Don’t forget that people with an impairment may need your patience and sufficient time to act independently. Give the person extra time to speak if they are using a communication aid or other assistive technology.
- Respect the person’s personal space and remember that a wheelchair/mobility aid is part of a person’s personal space. If you don't make a habit of leaning or hanging on people, don't lean or hang on someone's mobility aid. When talking with a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level to spare both of you a stiff neck.
- When greeting a person, if you normally shake hands, then offer the same gesture, even if the person has limited use of his/her hands or wears prosthesis. The person will let you know if a certain action is appropriate or not.
- When you offer to assist someone with a vision impairment, allow the person to take your arm. This will help you to guide, rather than propel or lead, the person. Never pet or play with guide dogs.
- Never pet or play with a person’s service animal. Even while the animal is resting it should be considered to be “working.”
- When greeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. Say, for example, "On my right is Andy Clark." When conversing in a group, remember to say the name of the person to whom you are speaking to give vocal cue. Speak in a normal tone of voice, indicate when you move from one place to another, and let it be known when the conversation is at an end.

- Treat adults as adults. Call a person by his or her first name only when you extend this familiarity to everyone present. Don't patronize people.
- To get the attention of a person who has a hearing impairment, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. Not everyone with hearing impairments can lip-read. Those who do will rely on facial expressions and other body language to help understand. Show consideration by facing a light source and keeping your hands and food away from your mouth when speaking. If an interpreter is helping you speak with a person who is deaf, make sure you talk to the person, not the interpreter.
- When giving directions to a person using a mobility aid, consider distance, weather conditions and physical obstacles such as stairs, curbs and steep hills.
- When directing a person with a visual impairment, use specifics such as "left a hundred feet" or "right two yards".
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take a person with an impairment to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking and talking. Give whole, unhurried attention when you're talking to a person who has difficulty speaking. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting, and be patient rather than speak for the person. When necessary, ask questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Repeat what you understand. The person's reaction will guide you to understanding.
- It's interesting to note that people tend to "globalize" impairments. They act as if someone with an obvious impairment in one area has many other impairments as well. Do not assume that a person with a physical impairment also has a hearing impairment or that his/her mental capacity is diminished in any way. Speak in a normal tone and do not use language that is condescending.

Remember the golden rule, "Treat people the way you would like to be treated." Everyone can contribute to change and help remove barriers.