The Seventh Sense

Exploring Attitudes About Disabilities

Interacting With People With Disabilities

CIDNY

Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York, Inc.
841 Broadway, Suite 301
New York, NY 10003

212/ 674-2300 Voice
212/ 674-5619 TTY
212/ 254-5953 Fax

www.cidny.org

This guide is meant to help you understand the kinds of interactions that are most positive when working with or relating to a person with a disability. Every person is an individual with individual preferences, so while the information herein provides generally acceptable interactions, the person with the disability is your best guide.

Interacting With People With Disabilities

Lack of knowledge, misinformation, or misconceptions may lead you to shy away from interacting with people with disabilities. It may help to remember that people with disabilities are more similar to than different from their nondisabled peers, and that the disability is only one aspect of the person. Learning more about the lives and experiences of those with disabilities may help to foster greater comfort and build positive relationships.

Language to use

Using the right language can help make your interactions and communications with people with all types of disabilities more successful:

- The preferred terminology is “disability” or “disabled,” not “handicap” or “handicapped.”
- Remember to put people first. It is proper to say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.”
- Avoid language that reinforces negative stereotypes, such as words that portray people with disabilities as victims or as medical patients.
- Using terms such as “wheelchair bound,” “deaf and dumb” or “crippled” is demeaning and disrespectful to people with disabilities.

Conversation tips

Since about 20% of people in our society have some type of disability, you never know when disability will be a factor during a conversation. If you are interacting with a person with a disability for the first time, be yourself. As in any new situation, others will respond to the mood you set and will feel more comfortable if you relax. The overall goal is simply communication between two individuals. Ultimately, it’s what is communicated, not how it’s communicated, that will be important.

- Talk directly with the person with the disability, rather than to family members, friends, aides or interpreters.
- Maintain the same eye contact and body language you would typically use in conversation.
- Don't assume that people with disabilities always need help. If you think they might, ask them.
- Avoid assumptions or guesses about a person's disability. It is better to wait until the person describes his/her disability and related limitations, needs and strengths to you.
- Do not assume that if a person is unable to do one thing, she/he cannot do other things. There is no need to speak loudly if a person is blind, or slowly if the person has a speech disability.
- If you have a question about what to do, what language or terminology to use, or what assistance, if any, to provide, the person with the disability should be your first and best resource. Don't be afraid to ask this person's advice.
- Always speak clearly. Use your typical speaking speed unless you know the person has a cognitive or hearing disability.
- Give yourself permission to make mistakes; if you are open to learning, this can be a source of growth.

Specific Disabilities

The following summary of the characteristics of different types of disabilities contains many true statements, but no absolute truths. Remember that every person with a disability is an individual, and that you are interacting with the person, not the disability.

Blind or Visually Impaired

Most people who are blind or visually impaired are mobile and independent. They may use a cane or guide dog. Some people who are blind can use Braille, although many do not.

- **Things to do:**
  Introduce yourself and explain your job or role. If you have met before, remind the person of the context. Give information about yourself that would be visibly obvious to those who can see you.

  Be descriptive when giving directions: pointing “over there” has little meaning; “turn right from the elevator and use the fourth door on your right” would be more helpful.

  Always ask the person if assistance is needed and, if so, what kind. Lead the person only after assistance is accepted--offer the person your arm rather than holding her/his arm. Offering the person your arm will avoid possible disruption of the person’s balance.

  When you describe sights or objects, be clear and literal, for example, tell him or her when you bring new items into the environment, describing what they are and where you have placed them, for example, “I’ve put an information packet on the table next to you on the left.”

  Let the person know when you are leaving.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Don’t move items (furniture, personal items) once the person who is blind has learned the position; doing this can be disorientating and possible dangerous. Don’t interact with a service dog while it is working (in harness).

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

People who are deaf or hard of hearing communicate in a variety of ways. They may communicate through American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a language different from English that has its own grammar, syntax and rules. Some people who are hard of hearing may lip-read and/or rely on devices that amplify sound. In general, lip-reading is difficult, can be fatiguing and tends to be only 30-50% effective at best. Other communication strategies for people who are deaf or hard of hearing include gestures or writing.

- **Things to do:**

  Find out how the person prefers to communicate by observing or asking the person.

  Face the person when speaking; make sure the lighting is good and there are few distractions. If the person reads lips, gain the person's attention, speak clearly, and use short, simple sentences when possible.

  Rephrase your statement if you are not sure that the person has understood you.

  If the person uses ASL, make sure a qualified interpreter is present, particularly if the information is complicated and/or involves important issues or decisions.

  Face and speak to the deaf person, not the interpreter. Leave ample time, since communication may be a slower process.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Make sure there are no physical barriers between you and the person you are conversing with; don't block your face.

  If the person uses hearing aids, avoid conversation in large, open and noisy surroundings. Realize that communication with two or more speakers, especially if there are interruptions and interjections, may be difficult for someone whose hearing is impaired, even if that person can communicate effectively one-on-one.

Mobility Disabilities

People with mobility disabilities may use a variety of devices, such as wheelchairs, crutches, canes or walkers, or no device at all. There is a wide range of physical capabilities among people who use wheelchairs. All wheelchairs are not the same: different sizes and shapes meet different needs. Some wheelchairs move manually; others are motorized.

- **Things to do:**
  If you are asked to fold, carry or store a wheelchair, or other devices, such as crutches, treat them respectfully and carefully; let the person know where you have put their devices.

  When you meet someone in a wheelchair or other mobility-related device, extend your hand to shake if that's what you normally do; a person who cannot shake hands will let you know.

  When speaking to someone using a wheelchair, try to bend to or sit down at the person's eye level so you can see one another easily.

  People with mobility disabilities who do not use wheelchairs may find it difficult to walk long distances; direct them to shorter/easier routes of travel.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Do not approach someone who is using a wheelchair and start pushing him or her without asking permission.

  When communicating, don't stand too close to the person using a wheelchair.

  Never grab the arm of a person using a cane or crutches.

Speech Disabilities

There are many reasons for people to have speech disabilities including cerebral palsy, stroke, head injury, and hearing impairments. People with speech disabilities may be difficult to understand, particularly initially. Communication may take more time and greater attention.

- **Things to do:**
  If you do not understand what a person is saying, say so, so the two of you may communicate more effectively.

  If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location, or use writing as an alternative means of communication.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Don't pretend to understand when you don't.

  Do not become impatient or finish sentences for the person with the disability.

  Avoid making assumptions about the intellectual or other abilities of a person with a speech disability.

Intellectual Disabilities (Developmental Disabilities)

People with intellectual disabilities or developmental disabilities tend to learn slowly. They may have difficulty applying what they have learned to new situations. Because people with intellectual disabilities are diverse, it is important not to underestimate their capacities.

- **Things to do:**
  Employ a calm, respectful attitude which is essential to effective communication.

  Speak in clear, simple sentences, using concrete rather than abstract concepts.

  Recognize that some people with intellectual disabilities may be overly eager to agree or to give the “right” answer in order to gain approval or avoid conflict.

  Ask questions designed to obtain accurate information; when possible, try to verify answers by asking a question in more than one way. Encourage the expression of personal preferences.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Avoid complex, multi-part questions; and situations requiring quick decisions

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy is a highly varied disability that affects the ability to control motor functions and muscles. Characteristics may include involuntary movement, spasms, and difficulties in speech. It is neither progressive nor communicable, and has little or no relation to intelligence.

- **Things to do:**
  Recognize that cerebral palsy affects people in diverse ways; let the person educate you on what he/she can and cannot do.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Be careful not to misinterpret involuntary movements, slurred speech and other characteristics as signs of illness or drug/alcohol use.

  Avoid underestimating the intelligence of persons with cerebral palsy.

Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities affect a person's ability to receive, process or express information. They may affect one or more areas of learning, such as reading or math. However, learning disabilities do not usually affect intelligence. Most people with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence and can function quite well. Because learning disabilities are invisible, they may be a source of confusion to others, who may not understand why someone who appears to function well cannot master basic academic tasks.

- **Things to do:**
  Seek to understand the learning styles and strengths of people with learning disabilities, and respond to their strengths. For example, give verbal explanations and/or extra time for reading tasks to people with reading disabilities. Provide information in a variety of ways. Be direct in communication.

- **Things to avoid:**
  Avoid overly hectic, over-stimulating environments. People with learning disabilities often benefit from quiet settings with few distractions.

Psychiatric Disabilities

Psychiatric disabilities are a broad category, covering depression, anxiety disorders, and a range of other conditions. These disabilities may affect the ability to think, feel, relate to others, and/or handle the stress of daily life. Often "attitude" in people with psychiatric disabilities comes from the feeling of being unheard or of not being respected.

- **Things to do**:

Recognize that psychiatric disabilities are usually invisible.

Recognize that people with psychiatric disabilities are no more apt to be violent than people without psychiatric disabilities. According to the American Psychiatric Association, "the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illness."

If someone appears to be acting in an unusual or inappropriate way (for example, they appear sleepy during an important conversation), ask what is happening before you make a judgment. Sleepiness can be a sign of a medication side effect.

Ask the person with a psychiatric disability what he/she needs to make him/her most comfortable.

- **Things to avoid**:

Making judgments or decisions on how to treat someone before you ask what would be best.

Where possible, limit the stress and pressure that a person will encounter.

Making negative assumptions about the person's abilities and potential.

Traumatic Brain Injury

People with traumatic brain injury have had damage to the brain, usually as the result of a trauma or accident. This can affect a variety of functions including learning, memory, and the ability to follow directions, muscle control, mobility or social skills. Such effects may not be immediately obvious to others, causing confusion and misunderstandings.

- **Things to do**:

  Work with the person to understand her/his strengths and limitations, as well as the range of strategies that the person has developed to address any limitations. For example, encourage the person to take notes during your conversations together, or offer to write the notes yourself, if that would be helpful for memory or comprehension limitations.

- **Things to avoid**:

  If the person has difficulty concentrating, avoid an overly distracting environment.

  Avoid giving complex directions, if the person has difficulty following them; if necessary, offer to accompany the person.

Frequently Asked Questions

When speaking to a person with a disability, is it all right to mention the disability, or will this make the person with a disability feel bad?

It is perfectly all right to mention a disability, especially if your reason for communicating has something to do with the disability (e.g., offering assistance). The person with a disability is aware of his or her disability and is also aware that you may be encountering it for the first time.

Is it appropriate for me to open a door for a person with a disability?

If you feel a person with a disability needs your help, ask the person directly if he needs assistance and wait for him to tell you how best to help. Be aware that he may opt to refuse your help. Don't take it personally.

Is it okay to go up to a person with a disability and tell her how much I admire her?

Remember that people with disabilities are just trying to live their lives like everybody else. While compliments are always nice, it may be more rewarding for you to take some time to get to know the person.

Is it okay to use common expressions, such as "See you later" to a blind person, or "Let's walk over to the office" to a person using a wheelchair?

Yes. It's okay to use common phrases from the vernacular with persons with disabilities.

Is it okay for me to ask a person what his disability is (e.g., "Why do you use a wheelchair")?

It depends on the situation. It is inappropriate and illegal to ask during a job interview. It may be completely appropriate in the course of getting to know a person with a disability, depending on that person's comfort level. He or she may answer the question or not, depending at what stage in a conversation or a relationship you bring it up. Use common sense.

If I'm talking to a person who is deaf through an interpreter, to whom do I direct my conversation?

Always speak directly to the person who is deaf. For example, say, “Where would you like to go next?” as opposed to “Ask her where she wants to go next."

Is it appropriate to ask a person with a disability personal questions, such as, “Does your disability hurt," "Do you go on dates?” or “Can you have children?”

It is appropriate if these questions are asked in the same situations in which you might normally ask them of a person who doesn't have a disability.

Is a person considered disabled only if I can see his or her disability?

No. Many disabilities are invisible, or not immediately apparent. Psychiatric disability is a prime example. Deafness can also be invisible to casual observation. Traumatic brain injury, learning disabilities, partial sight loss, HIV or cancer are also examples of disabilities that often do not show.