

Disability - Common Sense Interactions

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On occasion, we find ourselves in situations in which we don't know what to say or do. We may meet someone who looks, moves or acts differently and wonder how to best to interact with that individual so as not to offend. When in this situation, the important thing to remember is that you are interacting with another human being with the same rights, need for recognition, acceptance and respect as you.

When conversing with others, you can indicate that someone is an individual with a disability, a person who uses a wheelchair or crutches, a person who has a visual impairment, a person with hearing limitations. You will note that in each instance, the emphasis is on the person. When talking directly with someone with a disability or who speaks another language, speak directly to him or her even though they may be using the services of a translator (for someone who speaks a different language) or interpreter (for those who use sign language). It is insulting for you to talk directly to the translator. You are having a conversation with this individual through the services of someone else. Speak to your audience.

When introduced to someone in a wheelchair, offer to shake his or her hand. Most people with limited hand use or an artificial limb can shake hands and appreciate the courtesy. Place yourself at eye level if you are going to converse for any length of time. It is annoying and demeaning to be talked down to and it may give them a kink in the neck. Do not lean on or touch their chair. This is part of their personal body space. You wouldn't like someone to hang on the lapel of your jacket. Always treat adults as adults. Don't patronize a person in a wheelchair by patting them on the head or shoulder. Feel free to offer your assistance, but do not assume that a wheel chair user needs your help. If they do, they'll let you know.

It is, on the other hand, acceptable to lightly touch a deaf or hearing-impaired person on the shoulder or wave your hand in order to get their attention. Look directly at the person, speak slowly, clearly and expressively to determine whether or not they can read your lips. If they do read lips, remain in their direct view and keep your hands and food away from your mouth when you speak. Do not speak louder; speak more clearly. Enunciate your words. A hearing aide only makes sounds louder, not clearer.

Likewise, it is not necessary to shout or speak slower to visually impaired individuals, people with speech impediments or people in wheel chairs (I've seen this done). Unless someone has multiple impairments, they will hear you clearly. Identify yourself when speaking with someone who is visually impaired, at least until they learn to know you by voice. Identify the person to whom you are speaking by preceding the statement with a name. Otherwise, the blind individual may assume you are speaking to him or her.

Don't be embarrassed if you slip out with a "see you later", or "gotta run". These are colloquialisms that everyone uses and it is doubtful that a disabled person will be offended. If you want to offer guidance to a visually impaired person, offer the person your arm and walk slightly ahead. Your body motion will let the person know what to expect. Obviously, you should let them know of any obstacles and direct them out of harms way. When seating a blind person, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the chair. Avoid escalators or revolving doors, as they are very disorienting and dangerous. Do not touch, feed, pet, talk to, or distract a "seeing eye" or service animal.

Listen attentively when talking with a person who has difficulty speaking or who is a little slow. In our fast paced world, it is sometimes hard to do, but slow down. Be patient, listen and wait for the person to finish speaking. It is acceptable to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod or shake of the head. If you did not understand, repeat what you did understand and allow the person to elaborate. If it is frustrating for you, just think how frustrating it must be for them.

It should be obvious that you want to avoid outdated words and descriptions that are now considered disrespectful and derogatory. Try to avoid using any words and descriptions that do not put the person first. A wise woman once told me "We are all just temporarily "abled"." Think about it. If you've ever thrown one too many shovels of snow and come down with a bad back, you have probably spent a considerable amount of time lying on the floor pondering your fate. People with Disabilities are simply individuals who have been presented with a different set of life challenges than you and me. We are all just trying to make the best of it. Please share these tips with your less knowledgeable associates.