



North Country Center for Independence

Disability Etiquette

Basic Points of Etiquette ...

- Be sensitive and show respect if you need to ask a person about his or her disability.
- Be considerate and patient if it takes a person with a disability a longer time to do or say something.
- Be polite and patient when offering assistance, and **wait** until your offer is accepted. Listen and ask for specific instructions.
- Hold meetings and events in accessible locations, and be ready to provide specific accommodations if someone needs it to participate. If a barrier cannot be avoided, let the person know ahead of time.

When meeting and talking with a person who has a disability ...

- Speak directly to the person with a disability, not to someone who happens to be with them. For example, don't say, "*What would she like to drink?*"
- When in doubt, ask the person you are meeting whether he or she would like to shake hands with you.
- Treat adults as adults. Don't patronize or talk down to people with disabilities.
- It is fine to use common expressions like "see you soon" with a person who is blind, or "I'd better be running along" with a person using a wheelchair.
- Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Apologize if think you said or did something impolite. Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.

When meeting someone with a disability that affects learning, intelligence, or brain function ...

- Keep your words simple and concrete. Avoid metaphors and complicated phrasing.
- Stay focused on the person as he or she responds to you.
- Allow the person time to tell or show you what he or she wants.

When you are with a person who uses a wheelchair ...

- Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's wheelchair unless the person asks you to. The wheelchair is part of his or her personal space.
- Be ready to rearrange furniture or objects to accommodate a wheelchair user entering a room or sitting at a table.
- Be prepared to direct the person to accessible rest rooms, exits, and other facilities.

Talking with a person who is deaf or uses a hearing aid ...

- Let the person decide how they wish to communicate. They may want to use lip-reading, writing notes, or for more complicated and vital communications, sign language interpreting.
- If the person lip-reads, face him or her directly, speak clearly and with a moderate pace.
- Talk directly to the person, even when a sign language interpreter is present.

When meeting a person with a disability that affects speech ...

- Listen carefully, be patient, and don't interrupt or finish his or her sentences.
- Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase, or offer him or her a pen and paper.

Interacting with a person who is blind or visually impaired ...

- Identify yourself and introduce others who may be present.
- Don't leave the person without excusing yourself first.
- When offering to guide someone with a sight disability, never push or pull the person. Offer the person your elbow and walk slightly ahead.
- Describe the layout of new rooms and environments. Be specific. For example: "There is a chair three feet from you at eleven o'clock."
- Don't pet or talk to a guide dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and shouldn't be distracted.

When speaking or writing about disability ...

- Refer to an individual's disability only when necessary and appropriate to the topic being discussed.
- Use people first language -- refer to the individual first, then to his or her disability. (It is better to say "person with a disability," rather than "disabled person.")
- The following terms should be avoided in a disability context, because they disempower people or have negative meanings: *invalid, wheelchair-bound, victim, crippled, defect, suffers from, handicapped, retarded, or deaf and dumb.*
- Keep terminology simple and accurate. Don't overcompensate with terms like *differently-abled*.

For more information on disability etiquette contact:

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