

# DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

## Basic guidelines

Make reference to the person first, then the disability. Say “a person with a disability” rather than “a disabled person.”

Avoid the word “handicapped” in any use. The word comes from the image of a person standing on the corner with a cap in hand begging for money. People with disabilities do not want to be the recipients of charity or pity. They want to participate equally with the rest of the community. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc.

If the disability isn’t relevant to the story or conversation, don’t mention it.

Remember: A person who has a disability isn’t necessarily chronically sick or unhealthy. He or she is often just disabled.

A person is not a condition, so avoid describing a person as such. Don’t present someone as “an epileptic” or “a post-polio.” Instead, say “a person with epilepsy” or “a person who has had polio.”

## Common courtesies

Don’t feel obligated to act as a caregiver to people with disabilities. Ask if help is needed, but always wait until your offer is accepted. Listen to any instructions the person may have.

Leaning on a person’s wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on a person. It is considered annoying and rude. The chair is part of a person’s personal body space. Don’t hang on it.

Share the same social courtesies with people with disabilities that you would share with someone else. If you shake hands with people you meet, offer your hand to everyone you meet, regardless of disability. If the person is unable to shake your hand, he or she will tell you.

When offering assistance to a person with a visual impairment, allow that person to take your arm. This will enable you to guide, rather than propel or lead the person. Use specific directions, such as “left in 100 feet” or “right in two yards” when directing a person with a visual impairment.

When planning events that involve persons with disabilities, consider their needs before choosing a location. Even if people with disabilities will not attend, select an accessible spot. You wouldn’t think of holding an event where other minorities could not attend, so don’t exclude people with disabilities.

## Conversation

When speaking about people with disabilities, emphasize achievements, abilities and individual qualities. Portray them as they are in real life: parents, employees, business owners, etc.

When talking to a person who has a physical disability or a developmental disability, speak directly to that person. Don’t speak to that person through a companion or refer to him or her in the third person while in his or her presence. For people who communicate through sign language, speak to them, not to the interpreter.

Relax. Don’t be embarrassed if you use common expressions such as “see you later” or “gotta run.”

To get the attention of a person who has a hearing loss, tap them on the shoulder or wave. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if they read lips. Not all people with hearing loss can read lips. Those who do rely on facial expressions and body language for understanding. Stay in the light and keep food, hands and other objects away from your mouth. Shouting won’t help; written notes will. Use an interpreter if possible.

When talking to a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at eye level with that person. This will spare both of you a sore neck.

When greeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and others. For example, say, “On my right is John Smith.” Remember to identify persons to whom you are speaking. Speak in a normal tone of voice and indicate when the conversation is over. Let them know when you move from one place to another.