

Introduction

The United States Census Bureau reports that approximately 56.7 million Americans have a disability. This booklet is for anyone—with or without a disability—who wants to interact more effectively with people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was conceived with the goal of integrating people with disabilities into all aspects of life, particularly the workplace and the marketplace. Sensitivity toward people with disabilities is not only in the spirit of the ADA, it makes good business sense. It can help you expand your practice, better serve your customers, or develop your audience. When supervisors and co-workers use disability etiquette, employees with disabilities feel more comfortable and work more productively. Practicing disability etiquette is an easy way to make people with disabilities feel welcome.

You don't have to feel awkward when dealing with a person who has a disability. This booklet provides some basic tips for you to follow. And if you are ever unsure how to interact with a person who has a disability, just ask!

The Basics

ASK BEFORE YOU HELP

Just because someone has a disability, don't assume she needs help. * If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people. Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it. A person with a disability will oftentimes communicate when she needs help. And if she does want help, ask how before you act.

BE SENSITIVE ABOUT PHYSICAL CONTACT

Some people with disabilities depend on their arms for balance. Grabbing them, even if your intention is to assist, could knock them off balance,

Avoid patting a person on the head or touching his wheelchair, scooter, or cane. People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space.

* Note: We want you to think of people who have disabilities as individuals—your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors—so rather than use the amorphous group term "they" for people with disabilities, we use the pronouns "he" or "she" throughout this booklet.

THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Always speak directly to the person with a disability, not to his companion, aide, or sign language interpreter. Making small talk with a person who has a disability is great; just talk to him as you would with anyone else. Respect his privacy. If you ask about his disability, he may feel like you are treating him as a disability, not as a human being. However, many people with disabilities are comfortable with questions about their disability after getting to know someone. A simple "I don't feel comfortable sharing that" by the person with a disability can set the tone if it is not something that he/she is willing to share.

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do.

Don't make decisions for them about participating in any activity. Depending on the situation, it could be a violation of the ADA to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations.

RESPOND GRACIOUSLY TO REQUESTS

When people who have disabilities ask for an accommodation at your business, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough in your establishment to ask for what they need. And if they get a positive response, they will probably come back again and tell their friends about the good service they received.

Terminology Tips

PUT THE PERSON FIRST. Say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person." Say "people with disabilities" rather than "the disabled." For specific disabilities, saying "person with Tourette syndrome" or "person who has cerebral palsy" is usually a safe bet. Still, individuals do have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to use, ask.

Avoid outdated terms like "handicapped, crippled or retarded." Be aware that many people with disabilities dislike jargon, euphemistic terms like "physically challenged" and "differently abled." Say "person who uses a wheelchair" rather than "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound." The wheelchair is what enables the person to get around and participate in society; it's liberating, not confining.

With any disability, avoid negative, disempowering words like "victim" or "sufferer." Say "person with AIDS" instead of "AIDS victim" or "person who suffers from AIDS."

It's okay to use idiomatic expressions when talking to people with disabilities. For example, saying, "It was good to see you," and "See you later," to a person who is blind is completely acceptable; they use these expressions themselves all the time.

Many people who are Deaf communicate with sign language and consider themselves to be members of a cultural and linguistic minority group. They refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital "D," and may be offended by the term "hearing impaired." Others may not object to the term, but in general it is safest to refer to people who have hearing loss but who communicate in spoken language as "hard of hearing" and to people with profound hearing losses as Deaf or deaf.

People Who Use Wheelchairs or Other Mobility Devices

PEOPLE WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS have different disabilities and varying abilities. Some can use their arms and hands. Some can get out of their wheelchairs and even walk for short distances.

People who use wheelchairs are individuals, not equipment. Don't lean over someone who uses a wheelchair to shake another person's hand or ask a wheelchair user to hold coats. Setting your drink on the desktop attached to someone's wheelchair is a definite no-no.

- ◆ Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair; it's part of her personal space. If you help someone down a curb without waiting for instructions, you may dump her out of the chair. You may detach the chair's parts if you lift it by the handles or the footrest.
- ◆ Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked. Under the ADA, displays should not be in front of entrances, wastebaskets should not be in the middle of aisles, and boxes should not be stored on ramps.