



Disability Etiquette: Treat Everyone with Respect



Department
of Health



Disability etiquette promotes goodwill and respect among all people. It helps make society more inclusive for everyone.

People with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States. At some point in our lives, most of us will develop a disability, know someone who has one, or both. Disability affects everyone – all ages, genders, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

- When you greet someone with a disability, greet them the same way you would anyone else.
- Speak to the person the way you would like to be spoken to. Talk directly to the person, not their caregiver or assistant.
- Be respectful. No one wants to be talked down to. Be as formal or as familiar with the person as you are with anyone else.
- You should not assume a person with a disability needs help. They know their abilities best.
- It's always OK to ask. If they accept help, wait for their instructions.
- People appreciate their privacy. Ask if you may discuss a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Some people need extra time to gather their thoughts. Please be patient and let them set the pace.
- Service animals are working. You should not pet or try to distract a service animal.
- It's OK to use common phrases, such as: "See you later," "Gotta run," or "Did you hear about that?" Chances are the person with a disability will understand.

Put People First

Words are powerful. They can create beliefs, influence feelings and decisions, impact people's daily lives, and even influence social policy. Using respectful, positive terminology shows people with disabilities that they have a role in the community like everyone else.

There are two ways people refer to others with disability. "People First" is the standard style. It communicates with respect, putting the person first, not their disability. "People First" language would state: "A.J. is a person with autism." Another way people with disability are referred to is "Identity First." It recognizes disability as part of a person's identity. "Identity First" would state: "A.J. is autistic." If you're not sure which to use, use "People First."

Also note that many people consider being deaf as part of their identity. They can find it offensive to be called "hearing impaired" or "disabled." The terms "deaf" or "hard of hearing" may be more acceptable.

We all face challenges in life but people with a disability face different challenges. This doesn't make them "heroes" or "victims." It's best to avoid using these words to describe people with a disability.

Lastly, we can all stop stereotypes by not using degrading and outdated words and terms. For example: crippled, retarded, differently-abled, and physically challenged. These words are hurtful. They keep stereotypes and negative attitudes alive.

Tips for Specific Disabilities

Mobility Disability

- People like to be at eye level with other people. It's respectful to place yourself at their eye level when talking at length to a person who uses a wheelchair or crutches.
- A mobility device is part of a person's personal space. Do not lean or hang onto a person's device.
- People will let you know if they want a door opened or a chair pulled out.
- Clearly mark accessible entrances and routes. Keep them unlocked and free from barriers.
- When giving directions, consider the person's limitations and possible barriers. For example: stairs, hills, weather, and distance.
- Make sure all items on tables and counters are within reach.
- Tables and counters should be about 28" to 34" high to be reachable from a wheelchair.

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

- Use the following to communicate effectively: easy-to-understand words, concrete concepts, pictures, and visual aids.
- Information is easier to understand when large ideas are broken into small parts.
- Let them set the pace. Sometimes people may need time to adjust to change.
- Patience works. Use repetition, and recap the key points at the end of the conversation.
- Try asking questions in different ways to check that you have been understood and that you understand the person.
- Quick decisions may be difficult. People appreciate having enough time to decide. Replies may take as long as 15-20 seconds.

Visual Disability

- Before you speak, identify yourself and anyone else who is present. Let others know before you leave a group or a room.
- If you are speaking in a group, identify the person you are talking with, as well as yourself.
- It's OK to offer to read information to a person.
- Some people with low vision may ask for large-print materials.
- If someone is used to your location, but you've recently moved furniture or are in a new location, offer to reorient the individual. Describe their surroundings.
- If you've been asked to provide assistance, consider the following:
 - Do not push or pull a person.
 - Offer your arm, wait until they take your arm, and walk slightly ahead and alongside the person.
 - Describe barriers and be specific. For example, say "There is a crack in the sidewalk in about five feet ahead of you."
 - If approaching stairs, guide the person's hand to the handrail.
 - When helping someone take a seat, guide their hand to the back or arm of the chair.

Hearing Disability

- Want a person's attention? It is OK to step into a person's line of vision or wave your hand.
- Speak at a natural volume.
- Ask the individual: "How do you prefer to communicate?"
- Look directly at the person when you talk to them. Do this even if the person is using a sign language interpreter.
- If the person lip reads, speak slowly, clearly, and expressively. Keep your mouth in full view and in good light.
- If you are not understood, rephrase your sentence instead of repeating yourself.
- Many people in the deaf community may find these terms offensive: "hearing impaired" and "disabled." The terms "deaf" or "hard of hearing" may be more acceptable.

Speech Disability

- Patience is key. Wait for a person to finish speaking.
- If you have difficulty understanding, repeat what you believe was said, and ask the person to confirm. Don't pretend to understand. If necessary, ask short questions.
- If you have trouble understanding someone's speech, it is OK to ask the person to write it down. You could also suggest another way to communicate.
- Ask one question at a time. Give the person enough time to answer. Do not interrupt.
- If a person uses an assistive technology device, it should be within reach.

Hidden Disability

Some disabilities are invisible or not obvious. Some examples include:

- Learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, mental illness, and chronic conditions.
- Trouble walking long distances, climbing stairs, reaching objects, or remembering things.
- Loss of muscle control or mobility that is not obvious.
- Poor impulse control.
- Physical – for example, degenerative bone or joint diseases.



Consider these tips for hidden disabilities:

- Provide enough seating in meetings, waiting areas, and when you meet for social engagements.
- If walking with someone, walk at their pace.
- Ask a person if they would like help to reach or lift an object.
- Follow the person's lead. The person may ask you to write down directions or they may ask for a chair while they're waiting in line. They may have a learning disability or a chronic condition that contributes to fatigue.
- Certain conditions can interfere with a person's ability to think, feel, or relate to others. Again, being patient or allowing more time shows respect.

Sensory Processing Disability

- Be aware that some events may overstimulate or overwhelm. For example, being in large groups, being around bright lights, and hearing sudden noises.
- Offer quiet areas or rooms at events for people to take sensory breaks. These areas should be away from noise, lights, and crowds.

Chemical Sensitivities

- Encourage fragrance-free public events.
- Be considerate when using pesticides, cleansers, scented oils, and room fresheners. Install new carpet and paint when these activities are least likely to affect others.
- Maintain good ventilation and airflow.
- Enforce no smoking policies.

Bringing it Together

People with disabilities are people first and foremost. People with disabilities should be treated with the same respect as people without disabilities. Whenever you are in doubt on how to communicate with or respond to someone, watch for the person's lead. If you're unsure, it's OK to ask.

Learn More

For more information about disability, and promoting health and wellness among people with disability, contact the New York State Department of Health, Disability and Health Program at **(518) 408-5142**, send an email to: **DHP@health.ny.gov**, or visit: **www.health.ny.gov/community/disability/**.



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