

# DISABILITY ETIQUETTE 101

## General etiquette

- Speak about a person with a disability by first referring to the person and then to the disability. Refer to “people who are blind” rather than to “blind people.”
- When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than to a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
- When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others present. Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Leaning or hanging on a person’s wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
- Listen attentively when you’re talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for that person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.
- When speaking with a person in a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
- To get the attention of a person who is deaf or hard-of-hearing, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly. Not all people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can “read lips.” For those who do “read lips,” be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking.
- Relax. It’s okay if you happen to use accepted, common expressions, such as “See you later” or “Did you hear about this,” that seem to relate to the person’s disability.

## Sensitivity to blindness and visual impairments

The following points of etiquette are helpful to keep in mind when interacting with a person who is blind or visually impaired.

- Introduce yourself to people who are blind or visually impaired using your name and/or position, especially if you are wearing a name badge containing this information.
- Speak directly to people who are blind or visually impaired, not through a companion, guide, or other individual.
- Speak to people who are blind or visually impaired using a natural conversational tone and speed.
- Address people who are totally blind or severely visually impaired by name when possible. This is especially important in crowded areas.
- Immediately greet people who are blind or visually impaired when they enter a room or a service area. This allows you to let them know you are present and ready to assist. It also eliminates uncomfortable silences.
- Indicate the end of a conversation with a person who is totally blind or severely visually impaired to avoid the embarrassment of having them continue speaking when no one is actually there.
- Feel free to use words that refer to vision during the course of conversations with people who are blind or visually impaired. Vision-oriented words, such as *look*, *see*, and *watching TV* are a part of everyday verbal communication. The words blind and visually impaired are also acceptable in conversation.
- Be precise and thorough when you describe individuals, places, or things to people who are totally blind. Don't leave things out or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant. It is also important to refer to specific people or items by name or title instead of general terms like *you*, or *they*, or *this*.
- Feel free to use visually descriptive language. Making reference to colors, patterns, designs, and shapes is perfectly acceptable.
- Offer to guide people who are blind or visually impaired by asking if they would like assistance. Offer them your arm. It is not always necessary to provide guided assistance; in some instances it can be disorienting and disruptive. Respect the desires of the person you are with.
- Guide people who request assistance by allowing them to take your arm just above the elbow when your arm is bent. Walk ahead of the person you are guiding. Never grab a person who is blind or visually impaired by the arm and push him/her forward.
- Guide dogs are working mobility tools. Do not pet them, feed them, or distract

them while they are working.

- Do not leave a person who is blind or visually impaired standing in “free space” when you serve as a guide. Always be sure that the person you guide has a firm grasp on your arm, or is leaning against a chair or a wall if you have to be separated momentarily.
- Be calm and clear about what to do if you see a person who is blind or visually impaired about to encounter a dangerous situation. For example, if a person who is blind is about to bump into a stand in a hotel lobby, calmly and firmly call out, “Wait there for a moment; there is a pole in front of you.”

### **Interacting with people who have speech disabilities**

There are a variety of disabilities, such as stroke, cerebral palsy, and deafness, that may involve speech impairments. People with speech disabilities communicate in many different ways.

- People who have speech disabilities may use a variety of ways to communicate. The individual may choose to use American Sign Language, write, speak, use a communication device, or use a combination of methods. Find out the person’s preferred method and use it.
- Be appropriate when speaking with a person with a speech disability. Never assume that the person has a cognitive disability just because he or she has difficulty speaking.
- Move away from a noisy source and try to find a quiet environment for communicating with the person.
- If the person with a speech disability has a companion or attendant, talk directly to the person. Do not ask the companion about the person.
- Listen attentively when you are talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or shake of the head.
- If you do not understand what the person has said, do not pretend that you did. Ask the person to repeat it. Smiling and nodding when you have no idea what the person said is embarrassing to both parties. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- When you have difficulty conversing on the telephone with the person, suggest the use of a speech-to-speech relay service so that a trained professional can help you communicate with the person. Either you or the person can initiate the call free of charge via the relay service.
- If the person uses a communication device, make sure it is within his or her reach. If there are instructions visible for communicating with the person, take a

moment to read them.

- Do not make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do based on his disability. All people with disabilities are different and have a wide variety of skills and personalities.

*Adapted from the University of Texas at Arlington Advisor Handbook, <http://www.uta.edu/uac/uac/advisor-handbook/>.*