

A GUIDE TO DISABILITY ETIQUETTE & USING RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE IN THE WORKPLACE¹

1. **Be Yourself**

As in any new situation, everyone will feel more comfortable if you relax.

2. **Meeting Someone**

People who use wheelchairs may have a variety of disabilities. Some have use of their arms and some do not. When you meet someone, extend your hand to shake if that is what you normally do. A person who cannot shake hands will let you know. He or she will appreciate being treated in a normal way. If you are meeting a blind person, identify yourself. If you have met before, remind him of the context; he won't have the visual clues to jog his memory.

3. **Helping**

Do not automatically give assistance; ask first if the person wants help. Follow the person's cues, and ask if you are not sure. Be the assistant, not the director; let a blind person hold your arm and follow you. And don't be offended if someone refuses your offer of assistance. It's his or her choice to be as independent as they can be.

4. **Communication**

Talk directly to the person, not to an aide, friend, or interpreter. If the person has a speech impairment, listen carefully and patiently. Ask him to repeat if you don't understand. If the person doesn't understand you when you speak, try again. Don't let him think your communication with him is not worthwhile to you. If the person is deaf or hard of hearing, follow his or her lead; use gestures or write. If the person uses a wheelchair, sit and converse at his level.

5. **Interaction**

Do not leave a person with a disability out of a conversation or activity because you feel uncomfortable or fear that he/she will feel uncomfortable. Include him or her as you would anyone else. He or she knows what they can do and want to do; let it be their decision whether or not to participate.

6. **Disability**

Treat the person as an individual. Don't assume that the person's disability is all he can talk about or is interested in.

¹ The information contained in this guide was developed in consultation with a variety of sources, including the Centers for Independent Living and the Washington State Human Rights Commission.

7. Environments

Be sensitive about the setting. A noisy or dark environment, or people talking simultaneously, might make it difficult for people with a vision, speech, or hearing disability to participate in a conversation. Be aware of clear paths of travel for people who use wheelchairs or are blind. Describe going-on and surroundings (especially obstacles) to blind person.

8. Touching

Do not pet guide dogs, and do not touch a person with a disability unless there is a good reason (such as shaking hands in greeting or if the person has requested assistance). However, you may gently touch a deaf person to get his attention. Never push or operate a person's wheelchair without his or her permission.

9. Hidden Disabilities

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may have trouble following a conversation, may not respond when you call or wave, may make a request that seems strange to you, or may say or do something that seems inappropriate. The person may have a hidden disability, such as low vision, a hearing or learning disability, traumatic brain injury, mental retardation, or mental illness. Don't make assumptions about the person or his or her disability. Be open-minded.

10. Service Animals

If the animal provides a disability-related service to a person with a disability, you need to allow the service animal in the workplace. These animals are not pets, so a “no pets” policy does not apply. You can refuse to allow the service animal only if the animal poses an immediate or reasonably foreseeable risk or danger to people or property. Speculation that the animal poses a risk or danger is not enough to refuse the animal. A service animal must be trained, and owners can train their own service animals. Service animals should be under the control of their owners at all times. Service animals should not create sanitary problems or create distractions in the workplace. There are certain very specific types of medical and food service operations where certain animals can be excluded under certain circumstances. There is no requirement that the employer provide food, water, or toileting facilities for service animals.

11. Learning More

Lack of knowledge or misinformation may lead you to shy away from interacting with persons with certain disabilities. Preconceptions about mental illness, AIDS, cerebral palsy, Tourettes Syndrome and other disabilities often lead to a lack of acceptance by those around the person. Remember that we are all complex human beings; a disability is just one aspect of a person.

12. Respectful Language

Respectful Terms

Avoid These Labels

Person with a disability	Handicapped ... Invalid
Individual that has cerebral palsy	Victim ... Afflicted with C.P.
She uses a wheelchair	She is restricted or confined to a wheelchair ... wheelchair bound
He is deaf ... does not voice for himself ... nonvocal	He is a deaf mute ... deaf and dumb
She has been disabled since birth	Birth defect
He has a psychiatric disability ... emotional disorder ... mental illness	He is crazy ... insane ... mental patient
My aunt has epilepsy ... seizures	My aunt has fits
He is an employee with a learning disability ... Attention Deficit Disorder	The student is slow ... retarded ... lazy ... stupid ... underachiever
A person without a disability	A normal or healthy person
Steve has a mobility impairment	Steve is crippled and lame
Tonya has quadriplegia	Tonya is a quadriplegic
Accessible parking	Handicapped parking