



Disability Etiquette

General Etiquette

Speak directly to the person

Speak to the person rather than their companion, aide, caregiver or interpreter. Avoid talking about a person as if they weren't there when they are present.

Ask before you help

Don't automatically assume that someone with a disability needs help. Offer assistance when someone asks for help and ask how you can help before acting.

Be sensitive about physical contact

People with a disability may depend on their arms for balance. They may also consider their equipment part of their personal space so don't touch it.

Don't make assumptions

All people are the best judge of what they can or cannot do so let them decide.

In general, use person first language

Unless someone tells you they prefer different language, refer to the individual first, then to their disability, when it is relevant and appropriate. For example, say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person".

Avoid terms with negative meaning

Be aware of what you say and do not use any terms that might potentially have an unintentional negative connotation.

Don't portray people with disabilities as brave, special, superhuman, etc.

This implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.

Avoid using the term "normal" for people without disabilities

It is better to say "people without disabilities" or "typical", if necessary.

Practice disability specific etiquette

In some instances, specific disabilities may have additional etiquette. See the additional information provided to learn more.

Disability-Specific Etiquette

People who use wheelchairs or have mobility impairments

- Don't lean on or touch a person's wheelchair.
- Place yourself at eye level when in conversation.
- Refrain from unexpectedly touching or moving canes, crutches or other assistive devices.

People who are blind or visually impaired

- Identify yourself and allow others to do the same.
- If someone needs to be guided, offer your elbow.
- Walk on the opposite side of a guide dog or cane.
- Give specific, non-visual directions.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing

- Follow the person's cues to determine how they prefer to communicate.
- Before speaking, tap their shoulder or wave to get attention.
- Speak clearly and distinctly in a normal tone.
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, information that someone doesn't understand.
- Use facial expression, body language and gestures.
- Speak directly to the person who is deaf rather than to an interpreter.

People with speech disabilities

- Give the person your full attention, extra time to answer, and be patient.
- Don't interrupt or finish someone's sentences.
- Repeat for verification when you're unsure whether you've been understood.
- If you cannot understand someone, ask them to write down (if they're able) what they're trying to say or to suggest another way of communicating.

People with developmental disabilities

- Speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple words and concrete concepts.
- Rephrase what you're saying for better clarity.
- Stay focused on the person as they respond to you and be patient.

Service animal

- Don't distract, feed or pet the animal.
- Respect the handler.

Adapted by Darcy Cole, dacole@umn.edu, from: [Disability Etiquette Guide | Diversity at Pitt](#)