



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