

Ministry of Health and Social Services

Directorate : Social Welfare Services

Division: Rehabilitation

Windhoek, Namibia

Disability Etiquette / Courtesies

People with disabilities are not conditions, diseases or their disability....they are "**people first**". It is most important **not to refer to people with disabilities as "the disabled, handicapped, the blind** etc. Use language that preserves dignity and does not portray the individual as a victim or someone to be pitied. Avoid comments that imply that people with disabilities are overly courageous, brave, special, or super human; this obviously can be patronizing. Remember that a person with a disability is a person with feelings; treat him or her as you would want to be treated. Fear of the unknown and lack of knowledge about how to act when with a person with a disability, can lead to uneasiness. If a person acts unusually or seems different, just be yourself and let common sense and politeness break down any barriers that you may encounter. Many disabilities are hidden or not obvious at first; these can include low vision, seizure disorders, hearing loss, learning issues, mental illness, or health issues like arthritis. A good rule for life is "meet all people and accept them as they are, without judgment." Staring at a person with a disability is inappropriate and insensitive. If a child is curious or asks about a person with a disability, don't reprimand the child, rather answer his questions in a simple and factual manner

A **disability** is a condition caused by an accident, trauma, genetics or disease which may limit a person's mobility, hearing, vision, speech, intellectual or emotional functions.

A **handicap** is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person as a result of the disability. It is OK to say that a person is handicapped by obstacles, such as architectural barriers or attitudes of insensitive people.

Basic Points of Etiquette...

1. **Avoid** asking personal questions or **referring to someone's disability** unless it is relevant to the situation. If you must ask, be sensitive and show respect. Do not probe, if the person declines to discuss it.
2. A handshake is NOT a standard greeting for everyone. When in doubt, ASK the person whether he or she would like to shake hands with you. A smile along with a spoken greeting is always appropriate.
3. **Be considerate** and patient of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to do or say something.
4. **Be polite and patient when offering assistance**, and wait until your offer of assistance is accepted; then listen to or ask for specific instructions.
5. When planning a meeting or other event, try to **anticipate specific accommodations a person with a disability might need**. If a barrier cannot be avoided, let the person know ahead of time.
6. **Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's disability**. Don't say "suffers from," "a victim of," or "afflicted with." Don't refer to people with disabilities as "patients" unless they are receiving treatment in a medical facility. Never say "invalid." These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities. Respect and acceptance is what people with disabilities would rather have.
7. **Don't use "normal" to describe people who don't have disabilities**. It is better to say "people without disabilities" or "typical," if necessary to make comparisons

8. **Never say "wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair."** People who use mobility or adaptive equipment are, if anything, afforded freedom and access that otherwise would be denied them.
9. **Speak directly** to the person with a disability, not just to the ones accompanying him or her.
10. **Never assume that a person with a communication disorder (speech impediment, hearing loss, motor impairment) also has an intellectual disability.** This is not a good assumption, people with intellectual disabilities often speak well and their limitations are not always obvious initially.
11. **Never pretend to understand** what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase, or offer him or her a pen and paper. **It is OK to say "I am sorry, I do not understand what you are saying".**
12. It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon" or "I'd better be running along."
Speak to a person with a disability as you would anyone else.
13. **Relax.** Anyone can make mistakes. Offer an apology if you forget some courtesy. **Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.**

Guidelines for language relating to disability

Good terms to use

Bad terms to use

Person/people with disability / has a disability,	the disabled, the handicapped, defectives, invalids, deformed, crippled
People without disabilities, typical person	Normal, healthy, able-bodied
Wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair
Congenital disability, birth anomaly	Birth defect, affliction
Has Cerebral Palsy (CP)	A victim of cerebral palsy
People with an intellectual disability	Mentally deficient, retardate, a retard, feeble minded, slow
Person with Down's Syndrome	A Down's or Mongoloid
Person who has epilepsy, seizure disorder, fits	The epileptic
People who have mental illness, emotional disorder, or mental health issues	The mentally ill, crazy, psycho, mental case
People who are blind or visually impaired	The blind
People who are deaf or hearing impaired	Deaf mute, deaf and dumb
Person with speech or communication disorder	Tongue tied, mute

When meeting someone with a disability that affects learning, intelligence, or brain function...

1. Keep your communication simple. Rephrase comments or questions for better clarity.
2. Stay focused on the person as he or she responds to you.
3. Allow the person time to tell or show you what he or she wants.
4. People with dyslexia or other learning disabilities may read more slowly or experience trouble in completing forms. Ask if they need assistance, recognizing that their oral or verbal skills are often stronger than written skills.

When you are with a person who uses a wheelchair...

1. Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's wheelchair unless the person asks you to. The wheelchair is part of his or her personal space.
2. Try to put yourself at eye level when talking with someone in a wheelchair. Sit or kneel in front of the person.
3. Rearrange furniture or objects to accommodate a wheelchair before the person arrives.
4. Offer to tell where accessible rest rooms, telephones, and water fountains are located.
5. When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, consider distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles (curbs, stairs, steep hills, etc.).
6. Don't pet or distract a service dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and is always working. It is not a pet.

Talking with a person who is deaf or uses a hearing aid...

1. Let the person take the lead in establishing the communication mode, such as lip-reading, sign language, or writing notes.
2. Talk directly to the person, even when a sign language interpreter is present.
3. If the person lip-reads, face him or her directly, speak clearly and with a moderate pace. Speak normally; don't be overly conscious of your lip movement. Be sure to face the light source so the individual is able to see your lips well.
4. Do not position yourself in front of a window or harsh light or the person who is deaf or hard of hearing will have difficulty seeing you.
5. With some people, it may help to simplify your sentences and use more facial expressions and body language.
6. Do not shout at a person with a hearing impairment as it may distort sound if they are using a hearing device.

When meeting a person with a disability that affects speech...

1. Pay attention, be patient, and wait for the person to complete a word or thought. Do not finish it for the person.
2. Never pretend to understand if you don't. Ask the person to repeat. Tell the person what you heard and see if it is close to what he or she is saying.
3. Be prepared for various devices or techniques used to enhance or augment speech. Don't be afraid to communicate with someone who uses an alphabet board or a computer with synthesized speech.
4. Give your whole, unhurried attention. Keep your manner encouraging and relaxed rather than correcting. Let the individual set the pace of the conversation.

Interacting with a person who is blind or has a disability that affects sight or vision...

1. When greeting the person, identify yourself and introduce others who may be present.
2. Don't leave the person without excusing yourself first.
3. When asked to guide someone with a vision impairment, never push or pull the person. Allow him or her to take your arm, then walk slightly ahead. Point out doors, stairs, or curbs, as you approach them.
4. As you enter a room with the person, describe the layout and location of furniture,
5. Be specific when describing the location of objects. (*Example: "There is a chair three feet from you at eleven o'clock."*)
6. Don't pet or distract a guide dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and is always working. It is not a pet.
7. When assisting a person with a visual issue to sit down, place their hand on the back or the arm of the chair so they are then able to sit down on their own.
8. Consider the need for large print for some of your audience when using documents. Pay attention to seating arrangement when accommodating persons with visual impairments.

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