



Serving Customers with Disabilities (series)

Etiquette to improve your understanding of and interaction with people with disabilities

These tips were collected to help you better understand and successfully serve individuals with disabilities. Feel free to print this and keep it as a reference guide. This is not a comprehensive collection so you're encouraged to continue your research and familiarity beyond this resource.

PEOPLE WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS

People who use wheelchairs have different disabilities and varying abilities. Some can use their arms and hands. Some can get out of their wheelchairs and even walk for short distances.

People who use wheelchairs are people, not equipment. Don't lean over someone in a wheelchair to shake another person's hand or ask a wheelchair user to hold coats. Setting your drink on the desktop attached to someone's wheelchair is a definite no-no.

- Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair; it's part of her personal space. If you help someone down a curb without waiting for instructions, you may dump her out of the chair. You may detach the chair's parts if you lift it by the handles or the foot rest.
- Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked. Under the ADA, displays should not be in front of entrances, wastebaskets should not be in the middle of aisles and boxes should not be stored on ramps.
- Be aware of wheelchair users' reach limits. Place as many items as possible within their grasp. And make sure that there is a clear path of travel to shelves and display racks.
- When talking to a wheelchair user, grab your own chair and sit at her level. If that's not possible, stand at a slight distance, so that she isn't straining her neck to make eye contact with you.
- If the service counter at your office are too high for a wheelchair user to see over, step around it to address them.
- If your building has different routes through it, be sure that signs direct wheelchair users to the most accessible ways around the facility. People who walk with a cane or crutches also need to know the easiest way to get around a place, but stairs may be easier for them than a ramp. Ensure that security guards and receptionists at your business can answer questions about the most accessible way around the building.

- If the nearest public restroom is not accessible or is located on an inaccessible floor, allow the person in a wheelchair to use a private or employees' restroom that is accessible.
- People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so never grab them. These individuals may lean on a door for support as they open it. Pushing them or quickly opening the door may cause them to fall. Even pulling out or pushing in a chair may present a problem. Always ask before offering help.
- If you offer a seat to a mobility-impaired person, keep in mind that chairs with arms are easier for some people to use.
- Falls are a big problem for people with mobility impairments. Be sure to set out adequate warning signs after washing floors. Also put out mats on rainy or snowy days to keep the floors as dry as possible. (Make sure they don't bunch up and make the floor impassable for wheelchair users.)
- People who are not visibly mobility impaired may have needs related to their mobility. For example, a person with a respiratory or heart condition may have trouble walking long distances or walking quickly. Be sure that your office has ample benches for people to sit and rest on.

PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND

People who are blind know how to orient themselves and get around on the street. They are competent to travel unassisted, though they may use an assistive device such as a cane or guide dog.

A person may have a visual impairment that is not obvious. Be prepared to offer assistance—for example in reading—when asked.

- Identify yourself before you make physical contact with a person who is blind. Tell him your name—and your role if it's appropriate, such as security guard, usher, case worker, receptionist or fellow student. And be sure to introduce him to others who are in the group, so that he's not excluded.
- If a new customer is blind or visually impaired, offer him a tour of your business.
- People who are blind need their arms for balance, so offer your arm—don't take his—if he needs to be guided. (However, it is appropriate to guide a blind person's hand to a banister or the back of a chair to help direct him to a stairway or a seat.)
- If the person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the dog. As you are walking, describe the setting, noting any obstacles, such as stairs ("up" or "down") or a big crack in the sidewalk. Other hazards include: revolving doors, half-opened filing cabinets or doors, and objects protruding from the wall at head level such as hanging plants or lamps. If you are going to give a warning, be specific. Hollering "Look out!" does not tell the person if he should stop, run, duck or jump.
- If you are giving directions, give specific, nonvisual information. Rather than say, "Go to your right when you reach the office supplies," which assumes the person knows where the office supplies are, say, "Walk forward to the end of this aisle and make a full right."
- If you need to leave a person who is blind, let him know. And leave him near a wall, table, or some other landmark. The middle of a room will seem like the middle of nowhere to him.
- Don't touch the person's cane or guide dog. The dog is working and needs to concentrate. The cane is part of the individual's personal space. If the person puts the cane down, don't move it. Let him know if it's in the way.
- Offer to read written information—such as forms or instructions to customers who are blind.

- A person who is visually impaired may need written material in large print. Clear print with appropriate spacing is just as important as the type size. Labels and signs should be clearly lettered in contrasting colors. It is easiest for most people with vision impairments to read bold white letters on black background.
- Good lighting is important, but it shouldn't be too bright. In fact, very shiny paper or walls can produce a glare which disturbs people's eyes.
- If people who are blind or are visually impaired regularly use your facility as customers or employees, inform them about any physical changes, such as rearranged furniture, equipment or other items that have been moved. Keep walkways clear of obstructions.

A PERSON WHO HAS LOW VISION

A person with low vision may need written material in large print. A clear font with appropriate spacing is just as important as the type size. Labels and signs should be clearly lettered in contrasting colors. It is easiest for most people with low vision to read bold white letters on black background. Avoid using all uppercase letters because it is more difficult for people with low vision to distinguish the end of a sentence.

- Good lighting is important, but it shouldn't be too bright. In fact, very shiny paper or walls can produce a glare that disturbs people's eyes.
- Keep walkways clear of obstructions. If people with low vision regularly use your facility as customers or employees, inform them about any physical changes, such as rearranged furniture, equipment or other items that have been moved.

PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HAVE A HEARING LOSS

American Sign Language is an entirely different language from English, with a syntax all its own. Lip reading is difficult for people who are Deaf if their first language is ASL because the majority of sounds in English are formed inside the mouth, and it's hard to speech read a second language.

People who have a hearing loss, however, communicate in English. They use some hearing, but may rely on amplification and/or seeing the speaker's lips to communicate effectively.

There is a range of communication preferences and styles among people with hearing loss that cannot be explained in this brief space. It is helpful to note that the majority of people who incurred a hearing loss as adults do not communicate with sign language, do use English, and may be candidates for writing and assistive listening devices to help improve communication. People with cochlear implants, like other people with hearing loss, will usually inform you what works best for them.

- When the exchange of information is complex (e.g., during a job interview or doctor's visit or when reporting a crime) the most effective way to communicate with a native signer is through a qualified sign language interpreter. For a simple interaction (e.g., ordering in a restaurant or registering for a hotel room) writing back and forth is usually OK.
- Follow the person's cues to find out if she prefers sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking. If you have trouble understanding the speech of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, let her know.
- When using a sign language interpreter, look directly at the person who is deaf, and maintain eye contact to be polite. Talk directly to the person ('What would you like?'), rather than to the interpreter ('Ask her what she'd like.').

- People who are deaf need to be included in the decision-making process for issues that affect them; don't decide for them.
- Before speaking to a person who is deaf or has a loss of hearing, make sure that you get her attention. Depending on the situation, you can extend your arm and wave your hand, tap her on the shoulder or flicker the lights.
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person does not understand.
- When talking, face the person. A quiet, well-lit room is most conducive to effective communication. If you are in front of the light source (e.g., a window) with your back to it, the glare may obscure your face and make it difficult for the person who is hard of hearing to speech read.
- Speak clearly. Most people who have a hearing loss count on watching people's lips as they speak to help them understand. Avoid chewing gum, smoking or obscuring your mouth with your hand while speaking.
- There is no need to shout. If the person uses a hearing aid, it will be calibrated to normal voice levels; your shout will just distort the words.
- People who are deaf and some who have a hearing loss or speech disabilities make and receive telephone calls with the assistance of various technologies including a [TTY](#) or a video relay service. [VRS](#) enables a person who is deaf or has a hearing loss to make and receive telephone calls through a communications assistant who is a qualified American Sign Language Interpreter. For many people who are deaf or have a hearing loss, [VRS](#) is closer to "functionally equivalent" telephone services than any other form of relay service. For American Sign Language users, [VRS](#) conversations flow more smoothly, naturally, and faster than communicating by typing.
- When a [TTY](#) user calls a business that does not have a [TTY](#), she places the call through her state's relay service. Likewise, a business that does not have a [TTY](#) can reach a customer who is a [TTY](#) user through the relay service. If you receive a relay call, the operator will identify it as such. Please do not hang up; this is the way that people who are deaf are able to call your office to find out what hours you are open, or make an appointment.

A PERSON WITH A SPEECH DISABILITY

Some speech impairments appear in adulthood, including those caused by stroke, traumatic brain injury, or brain tumors, or those caused by treat cancer such as the removal of the voice box or tongue. Others problems can be present since childhood for example cleft-palate. Any of these problems can make it difficult to produce useful speech. A person who has speech disability may be difficult to understand.

- Give the person your full attention. Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences. If you have trouble understanding, don't nod. Just ask him to repeat. In most cases the person won't mind and will appreciate your effort to hear what he has to say.
- If, after trying, you still cannot understand the person, ask him to write it down or to suggest another way of facilitating communication.
- A quiet environment makes communication easier.
- Don't tease or laugh at a person with a speech disability. The ability to communicate effectively and to be taken seriously is important to all of us.

A PERSON OF SHORT STATURE

There are 200 diagnosed types of growth related disorders that can cause dwarfism and that result in the person being 4 feet 10 inches or less in height. Average-size people often underestimate the abilities of dwarfs. For an adult, being treated as cute and child-like can be a tough obstacle.

- Be aware of having necessary items within the person's reach to the maximum extent possible.
- Be aware that persons of short stature count on being able to use equipment that is at their height. Be sensitive about not using lower telephones, bank counters and urinals if they are in limited supply.
- As with people who have other disabilities, never pet or kiss a person of short stature on the head.
- Communication can be easier when people are at the same level. Persons of short stature have different preferences. You might kneel to be at the person's level; stand back so you can make eye contact without the person straining her neck (this can be hard to do in a crowded room); or sit in a chair. Act natural and follow the person's cues.

PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

Some people with a mental health condition may at times have difficulty coping with the stresses of daily life. Their disorder may interfere with their ability to feel, think or relate to others. Most people with psychiatric disabilities are not violent. One of the main obstacles they face is the attitudes that people have about them. Because it is a hidden disability, chances are you will not even realize that the person has a psychiatric disability.

- Stress can affect the person's ability to function. Try to keep the pressure of the situation to a minimum. However, do not assume that a person with a psychiatric disability is unable to cope with stress.
- People who have psychiatric disabilities have varying personalities and different ways of coping with their disability. Treat each one as an individual. Ask what will make him most comfortable and respect his needs to the maximum extent possible.
- In a crisis, stay calm and be supportive. Ask how you can help, and find out if there is a support person who can be sent for. If appropriate, you might ask if the person has medication that he needs to take.
- **Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities are more likely to be violent than people without psychiatric disabilities; this is a myth.**
- The wide range of behaviors associated with mental illness vary from passivity to disruptiveness.
- Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities are not capable of working in a wide variety of jobs that require a wide range of skills and abilities.
- When the illness is active, the individual may or may not be at risk of harming him or herself, or others.
- People with mental illness do not have an intellectual disability; however, some people who have an intellectual disability also have mental illness. Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities also have cognitive disabilities or are less intelligent than the general population. In fact, many people with mental illness have above-average intelligence.
- Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities necessarily need any extra assistance or different treatment.
- Treat people with psychiatric disabilities as individuals. Do not make assumptions based on experiences you have had with other people with psychiatric disabilities.
- Do not assume that all people with psychiatric disabilities take or should take medication.
- If someone with a psychiatric disability gets upset, ask calmly if there is anything you can do to help and then respect their wishes.
- Do not assume that people with psychiatric disabilities do not know what is best for them, or have poor judgment.

COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

A PERSON WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Persons with an intellectual disability, sometimes referred to as developmental disability learn slowly. They have a hard time using what they have learned and applying it from one setting or situation to another.

- Speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple words and concrete—rather than abstract—concepts. Help her understand a complex idea by breaking it down into smaller parts.
- Don't use baby-talk or talk down to people who have mental retardation.
- Remember that the person is an adult and, unless you are informed otherwise, can make her own decisions.
- People with mental retardation may be anxious to please. During an interview, the person may tell you what she thinks you want to hear. Questions should be phrased to elicit accurate information. Verify responses by repeating each question in a different way.
- It can be difficult for people with mental retardation to make quick decisions. Be patient and allow the person to take her time.
- Clear signage with pictograms can help a person who is mentally retarded to find her way around a facility.

A PERSON WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY

These are life-long conditions that interfere with a person's ability to receive, express or process information. Although they have certain limitations, most people with learning disabilities have average or above-average intelligence. You may not realize that the person has a learning disability because he functions so well. Or you may be confused about why such a high-functioning person has problems in one aspect of his work.

- People with dyslexia or other reading disabilities have trouble reading written information. Give them verbal explanations and allow extra time for reading.
- Don't be surprised if you tell someone very simple instructions and he requests that you write them down. Because spoken information gets "scrambled" as he listens, a person who has a learning disability such as auditory processing disorder may need information demonstrated or in writing.
- Ask the person how you can best relay information.
- Be direct in your communication. A person with a learning disability may have trouble grasping subtleties.
- It may be easier for the person to function in a quiet environment without distractions, such as a radio playing, people moving around or loudly patterned curtains.

PEOPLE WITH TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

People who have a traumatic brain injury have experienced damage to the brain usually as the result of trauma, such as an accident or stroke.

Some of the factors that affect persons with learning disabilities also apply to persons with traumatic brain injury. People with brain injury may have a loss of muscle control or mobility which may not be obvious. For example, a person may not be able to sign her name, even though she can move her hand.

- A person with a brain injury may have poor social skills, such as making inappropriate comments. She may not understand social cues or "get" indications that she has offended someone. In her frustration to understand, or to get her own ideas across, she may seem pushy. All of these behaviors arise as a result of the injury. So, you should always be mindful and

patient because you never know when someone is demonstrating these behaviors as a result of a brain injury.

- A person with a brain injury may be unable to follow directions due to poor short-term memory or poor directional orientation. They may ask to be accompanied or ask to have directions written down.
- If you are not sure that the person understands you, ask if they would like you to write down what you were saying.
- The person may have trouble concentrating or organizing her thoughts, especially in an overstimulating environment, like a crowded lobby or classroom. Be patient. You might suggest going somewhere with fewer distractions

PEOPLE WHO LOOK DIFFERENT

A different issue confronts people who may not be limited in their life activities, but who are treated as if they have a disability because of their appearance. People with facial differences, such as cleft lip or palate, cranio-facial disfigurement, or a skin condition; people who are above or below the average height or weight; people who may display visible effects of medication, such as a tremor—in short, people who look different— have the frequent experience of finding people staring at them, looking away or looking through them as if they are invisible.

- Everyone needs to have a positive self-image to be a fully participating member of society. Be sure that you don't contribute to stigmatizing people who look different.
- If the situation is appropriate, strike up a conversation and include the person in whatever is going on.

PEOPLE WITH HIDDEN DISABILITIES

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may make a request or act in a way that seems strange to you. That request or behavior may be disability-related.

- For example, you may give seemingly simple verbal directions to someone, but the person asks you to write the information down. He may have a learning disability that makes written communication easier for him.
- Or a person may ask to sit, rather than stand, in line. This person may be fatigued from a condition such as cancer, or may be feeling the effects of medication.
- Even though these disabilities are hidden, they are real.
- Please respect the person's needs and requests whenever possible.
- Do not make assumptions or judge someone based on your own experiences.

PEOPLE WITH AUTISM

When serving someone with autism there are several important points to consider that can help them be safe, included, respected, and equal participants in all kinds of activities. Remember that the things listed here are access needs and not conveniences or luxuries. Each autistic person is different and may need more or less or different accommodations.

- Please use respectful language, including considering identity-first (autistic) vs. person-first (person with autism) language.
- Many in the autistic community strongly prefer identity-first language and should have their wishes respected. Respectful language also means not using functioning (high vs. low functioning) labels to describe people.
- Do not insist on eye contact. Eye contact can be very distracting or even uncomfortable and threatening to many autistic people.

- It is important to understand that autistic people communicate in many different ways, from spoken words to typing to gestures and sounds. Meaningful interaction with autistic people must involve respecting their manner of communication. Make sure to allow for sufficient processing time when having a conversation with or asking questions of an autistic person. Offering a text-based way to communicate (text, instant message, etc.) is a good alternative for people who may be uncomfortable with oral speech in some or all settings.
- Bear in mind that an autistic person's tone of voice, body language, or facial expressions may not match what they intend to communicate. Do not expect an autistic person to read nonverbal communication. When necessary, be clear and direct.
- Large groups can be over-stimulating or overwhelming for many autistic people. It can be difficult for autistic people to time their responses or understand the social nuances of large groups. Small groups in quiet rooms can be a good option for meaningful autistic participation.
- Some autistic people have difficulty understanding auditory information, especially when there is background noise. It is helpful to minimize non-essential sensory input to create a safer sensory environment and facilitate autistic communication. These can be things as simple as closing doors to shut out background noise or finding environments to meet that are quiet.
- To accommodate sensory needs, refrain from wearing perfumes or scented toiletries. Loud noises should be avoided. Lighting is important as well. Fluorescent lighting can cause severe sensory processing issues, so natural light or soft, incandescent lighting is better. Ask before using flash photography as it can cause sensory overload, as well as seizures in the one-third of autistic people who have seizures and/or epilepsy

NEUROLOGICAL CONDITIONS

PEOPLE WITH CEREBRAL PALSY

As a result of injury to the central nervous system, people with cerebral palsy (CP) have difficulty controlling their muscles.

- Cerebral Palsy can effect a person's speech. Follow the tips above for interacting with persons who have speech disabilities.
- Many people with CP have slurred speech and involuntary body movements. Your impulse may be to discount what they have to say, based on their appearance. Monitor your responses and interact with the person as you would with anyone else.
- A person who may appear to be drunk, sick or have a medical emergency might in fact have CP or another disability. Get the facts before acting on your first impression, whether the situation is business, social or law enforcement.

PEOPLE WITH TOURETTE SYNDROME

Individuals with Tourette's may make vocalizations or gestures such as tics that they cannot control. A small percentage of people with Tourette Syndrome involuntarily say ethnic slurs or obscene words. An employee or other person with Tourette Syndrome will benefit from the understanding and acceptance of co-workers and others.

- If a person with Tourette makes vocalizations during a conversation, simply wait for her to finish, then calmly continue.

- The more the person tries to contain these urges, the more the urges build up. It may be helpful for a person with Tourette to have the option to leave the meeting or conversation temporarily to release the build-up in a private place.

PEOPLE WITH EPILEPSY

This disability is characterized by seizures which happen when the electrical system of the brain malfunctions. The seizures may be convulsive, or the person may appear to be in a trance. During complex partial seizures, the person may walk or make other movements while he is, in effect, unconscious.

- If a person has a seizure, you cannot do anything to stop it. If he has fallen, be sure his head is protected and wait for the seizure to end.
- When a seizure has ended, the person may feel disoriented and embarrassed. Try to ensure that he has privacy to collect himself.
- Be aware that beepers and strobe lights can trigger seizures in some people.

The material provided in the handout was collected from the following sources.

Job Accommodation Network

United Spinal Association

US Department of Labor

NCWorks Training Center

ncwtc@ncommerce.com

Phone: (919) 814-0399