



Disability Etiquette Tips

Etiquette Tips

When interacting with a person with a disability it is important to be mindful of how best to do so, depending on his or her disability. These etiquette tips will help you in your relationship with a person with a disability.

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Persons Using Wheelchairs:

- A person's wheelchair is part of his or her body space and should be treated with respect. Don't hang or lean on it unless you have the person's permission. Don't be tempted to pat a person in a wheelchair on the head, as it is a degrading gesture.
- Speak directly to the person and if the conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit down or kneel to get yourself on the same level as the person in the wheelchair.
- Don't worry about using expressions such as "running along" or "walked away" when speaking to a person in a wheelchair. These sayings are used in everyday conversation and are not offensive.
- Wheelchair use provides freedom. Don't assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy. It is a means of freedom, which allows the person to move about independently. Structural barriers in public places create inconveniences for wheelchair users. You can help by advocating for wheelchair access.
- When giving wheelchair users directions, be aware of architectural barriers such as narrow doorways, stairs, curbs, etc.
- When a person transfers out of the wheelchair to a chair, toilet, car or other object, do not move the wheelchair out of reaching distance. Some people who use a wheelchair for mobility can walk with aid, such as braces, walkers, or crutches. They use wheelchairs some of the time to conserve energy and move about more quickly.
- Don't classify persons who use wheelchairs as sick. Although wheelchairs are often associated with hospitals, they are used more frequently to help people with mobility disabilities get around their home, work and community.
- Relationships are Important. Have eye and physical contact with chair users in the same respectful manner you would a person that isn't in a wheelchair.

Persons with Speech Difficulties:

- Give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has difficulty speaking.
- Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
- Rather than speak for the person, allow extra time for the conversation and be patient. Do not finish a person's sentence.
- If you have difficulty understanding, don't pretend that you do. Repeat as much as you do understand. The person's reaction will guide you and clue you in.

Communication with Persons with Cognitive/Language Impairments:

- Use a calm voice and be reassuring. Use short sentences and simple, concrete words.
- Do not argue with the person. If the person tells you he is waiting for his wife to come and you know that his wife died several years ago, do not state "You know your wife died several years ago." The person will either get mad because you are wrong or become grief stricken because he has just learned his wife died. It would be better to reassure the person that everything is all right; his wife has just been delayed. Then divert his attention to an activity.
- Treat each person as an individual with talents and abilities deserving of respect and dignity. Individuals can usually tell if they are being talked down to like a child, which can make a situation worse.
- Give extra time for the person to process what you are saying and to respond. Look for signs of stress and/or confusion.

Persons with hearing loss:

- Hearing aids do not guarantee that the person can hear and understand speech. They increase volume, not necessarily clarity.
- Get the person's attention with a wave of the hand, or a tap on the shoulder. Move away from background noise.
- Speak clearly and slowly, but without exaggerating your lip movements or shouting. Be flexible in your language. If the person experiences difficulty understanding what you are saying, switch the words around and rephrase your statement rather than keep repeating. If difficulty persists, write down what you are saying.
- Many persons with hearing loss read lips. Place yourself facing the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when talking in order to provide a clear view of your face.
- When an interpreter accompanies a person, direct your remarks to the person rather than to the interpreter.
- Look directly at the person and speak expressively. The person who has a severe hearing loss will rely on your facial expressions, gestures, and body movements to assist in

understanding. Use sign language if you and the person are both familiar with it. Ask what the person prefers.

Persons with Vision Loss:

- People with visual impairments do not necessarily hear better than others or have ultra developed sense of touch. They may have trained their other senses to assist them with mobility, etc.
- When you enter a room, indicate who you are. Let the person know when you are leaving the room.
- When talking to a person with a visual impairment, begin by identifying yourself and that you are speaking to them.
- When addressing a person who is blind, it is helpful to call them by name or touch them gently on the arm.
- When offering your assistance, do not grab a person's cane or arm; this can be very disorienting for the person. If you are walking with a person who is blind, offer your arm for them to hold. The person may feel most comfortable walking a half step behind. Walk at your normal pace. It is helpful to speak casually and naturally about the terrain, objects and buildings you are passing as you walk. Stop for curbs and steps; let the person know if he or she should step up or down. Once you have indicated up or down, proceed and they will follow.
- Don't worry about using words such as "see" or "look" in your conversation. These words are a part of everyday conversation and are not offensive.
- Not all visually impaired people read Braille. Ask the person what alternative format they prefer.
- Do not pet a guide dog unless you have been given permission – these dogs are working and they need to concentrate.
- It is appropriate to offer your help if you think it is needed, but don't be surprised if the person would rather do it himself. Ask first!
- Remember that you'll need to communicate any written information orally.

Persons with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities:

- Reassure the person that you understand he or she is chemically sensitive and that you will work with him or her in providing care. Be sure to ask what the person is sensitive to, including his or her history of reactions to various drugs you may have to administer.
- Whenever seeking care at a facility, such as a hospital, it is beneficial for a person with multiple chemical sensitivity to take his or her own medical supplies and equipment with them, including oxygen mask and tubing, medications, food and water, bedding, clothing and soap – he or she may be sensitive to these items if issued at a shelter or hospital.
- Avoid placing the person in rooms with recent pesticide sprays, strong scented products like disinfectants, cleaners, scented candles and room fresheners, new paint or carpet, or other recent remodeling.
- Allow the person to wear a mask or respirator, use an air filter, or open a window as needed.

- Consider how your actions may affect the access of others. For some of us, the fragrances we wear have deep personal, religious, or cultural significance. With dialogue, we can find creative ways to deal with the fact that what is empowering to one is dangerous to another. However, if someone moves away from you or asks you to move, don't be offended – please realize this person just needs to breathe, and honor his or her request. Dialogue is not possible during moments of immediate physical distress.
- Don't wear any scented products to events that specify “no perfume” or “no fragrance” or similar notice. HINT: If there are people at the event that have CFIDS or Fibromyalgia, they probably have chemical sensitivities too! This means, as much as possible, try to avoid the following:
 - Perfume, cologne, aftershave, scented or essential oils.
 - Scented lotions, moisturizers, deodorants, or cosmetics.
 - Hairspray, gel, or mousse.
 - Deodorant (scented), sanitary napkins, or tampons.
 - Clothing that has been recently washed in scented detergent/fabric softener OR that has been dry-cleaned OR that has been worn near smoke, fragrance, or petrochemicals.
- Don't wear perfume to public places or events. Fragrances you wear, while they may feel personal and private, do not stay on your body, but float out into the air around you, affecting the breathing air of other people. Because of the chemical oils now used in such products, they may even linger in the air after you are gone! Like cigarette smoke, people with asthma, MCS, or lung disease may be adversely affected by your “second-hand scent.”
- For your own health, and those of the people around you, consider switching to non-toxic, fragrance free personal care products. Such products can be found at whole foods or health stores, or even in the drug store. Look for products that say things like “No perfumes, dyes, or additives” or “fragrance free, hypo-allergenic.”
- Make events you host fragrance-free. Post on flyers, brochures, websites, and event registration forms that your event is fragrance-free and ask participants to avoid wearing scented products to the event.
- Beware that “natural” or “unscented” do not necessarily mean they are safe. “Natural” can mean anything – it is an unregulated word and “unscented” may mean the product contains an additional (toxic) masking fragrance to cover other odors.

Additional Suggestions:

- Don't discourage children from asking questions about disabilities. Children have a natural curiosity that needs to be satisfied so they do not develop fearful or misleading attitudes. Most people are not offended by questions children ask them about their disabilities or wheelchairs.
- Remember that the person with a disability is a person like anyone else.
- Appreciate and emphasize what the person can do.
- It is appropriate to offer your help if you think it is needed, but don't be surprised or offended if the person would rather do it himself. If you are uncertain how to assist, ask the one who needs assistance.