

Etiquette: meeting and working with disabled people

Apparently insignificant details of behaviour and language can offend disabled people, as they often reinforce discrimination and inaccurate assumptions. We don't want to be too prescriptive, but it helps if you can think about your actions and language. Don't be embarrassed to ask what people's needs are, they are the experts!

- Meeting and Greeting
- Organising Events
- Language

Meeting and Greeting

General

- Do shake a person's hand
- Don't lean on their wheelchair, if they have one
- Do offer assistance, wait until it is accepted and provide the help in the way the person asks you to — and don't be offended by a refusal
- Don't make assumptions — remember that anybody may have a hidden impairment, diabetes or ME for example
- Treat people as individuals and treat adults as adults
- Talk to the disabled person — and not to their assistant or dog
- Don't ask personal or medical questions
- Don't worry about making mistakes — just ask
- Avoid stiff necks! Try to get at a wheelchair user's eye level

Meeting people with hearing or speech impairment

- Don't shout at Deaf or hard of hearing people; do position yourself in their vision, and attract their attention with a light touch or a wave if you need to
- Do ask how a person wants to communicate — they may wish to lip-read, for example
- Lip-reading is tiring and not totally reliable; speak slowly and clearly; try and provide emphasis with gestures and facial expressions; face the light, and don't cover your mouth; do trim your beard and moustache
- Deaf people may regard British Sign Language (which has a unique grammatical structure) as their first language, not English
- Be patient with people with a speech impairment; don't correct them; don't finish their sentences; if you don't understand, don't pretend you do, so do ask them to repeat if necessary, and tell them what you have understood so far

Meeting people with visual impairment

- Tell a visually impaired person who you are; introduce other people who are there, and say where they are
- Don't grab a person to guide them — let them take your arm; do ask them if they wish to be warned about steps, doors, and other obstacles

- Do say clearly where their seat is, or place their hand on its back or arm
- You can use a common saying like 'see you tomorrow' with a visually impaired person
- Remember that a visually impaired person may miss out on gestures or facial expressions and so appear to respond inappropriately - it may seem that they do not get a joke, for example, when in fact it is not properly communicated to them

Organising Events

- Advertise the accessibility of the venue
- Consider physical access and space, including parking and toilets — are entrances, lifts, doors, and corridors wide enough?
- Do you need spaces for wheelchair users, and is there room for them to wheel in and manoeuvre?
- Do you need a hearing loop?
- Do you need to hire a sign-language interpreter?
- Think about producing literature in forms other than standard print — large print, tape, Braille, and electronic format, for example
- It helps if a person answering a question from the floor can repeat it so that everybody has heard or interpreted it

Language

Using appropriate language is polite and promotes equality; using inappropriate language causes offence. Unfortunately, there are still some traps to fall into, as even some disabled people are inconsistent, or they might appropriate for themselves, language that others no longer use: 'crips' or 'cripples' for example. Here are some guidelines:

- Don't use 'the disabled' or 'the blind', this defines people by their impairment and implies that members of these groups are all the same; do use 'disabled people', 'blind', or 'visually impaired people'
- Medical terms ('spastic', 'quadriplegic' for example) don't reflect people's abilities; they may reflect negative attitudes. If a person's condition needs to be referred to, then they are 'a person with dyslexia' or whatever
- Disabled people are not 'abnormal'; non-disabled people are not 'normal'
- Disabled people are not 'brave', 'afflicted', 'victims,' or 'tragic', and they don't 'suffer' from anything, but they do experience discrimination and other negative attitudes
- People with mental health problems aren't 'loonies' or 'schizos'
- People with learning difficulties are not 'retarded', 'backward', or 'mentally handicapped'
- Don't worry about mistakes, but do be aware of the issue — if in doubt, ask a disabled person how they prefer to be described.

Working with personal assistants and other support workers

Disabled people may be supported by personal assistants (PAs), other workers, or dogs. You may encounter them in academic, training, or social situations.

Support workers

Support workers includes:

- Personal assistants who provide practical and personal support — for example, washing, dressing, going to the toilet, or driving. The same person may sometimes provide support in work or study
- Sign language interpreters, using British Sign Language to convey speech to Deaf people
- Lip speakers, conveying speech to deaf lip readers using unvoiced speech
- Academic supporters, note taking, or book fetching
- Communication supporters, interpreting unclear speech
- Assistance dogs, including the familiar Guide Dogs, but also Hearing Dogs and Support Dogs

Working with support workers

- Don't ask PAs questions about the disabled person they work for (the “does she take sugar?” trap); ask the disabled person
- Do look at the disabled person when they are speaking to you, even if they are using an interpreter or communication support worker
- PAs don't participate in the event — but sometimes try to!
- Don't pet working dogs — they are working
- If you've hired a disabled person to provide a service — a lecture or a training session, for example — there's no need to thank their PA. They'll get their credit and thanks from the disabled person who employs them
- Remember that disabled people employ, manage, and organise PAs to provide themselves with a service, and PAs are not carers — disabled people need assistance, not care

But of course:

- Treat support workers and dogs with courtesy and respect
- Remember that they all, including dogs, may need: somewhere to sit; something to eat or drink; to go to the toilet; to take a break
- Remember that the work interpreters do is very tiring