

Communicating Effectively

WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE A DISABILITY



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www.NDCPD.org

Communicating Effectively with People who Have a Disability

Introduction

Nearly one out of every five Americans has some type of disability. That is more than 54 million people or 20% of our population nationwide. More than 128,000 of North Dakotas 630,000 residents have a disability; about 68,000 are working-age.

Some disabilities are visible and readily apparent. People with mobility impairments often use wheel chairs, walkers, crutches, or other assistive devices. People who are blind or visually impaired sometimes use service animals or white canes. But many other disabilities are invisible, such as deafness, hard of hearing, heart or respiratory conditions.

A lot of progress has been made toward breaking down barriers in employment, education, and accessibility, but actual communication and interaction with people with disabilities still needs attention. Many people are afraid of accidentally saying something that will offend a person with a disability, so they say nothing and avoid contact.

In this publication you will find suggestions that will help educate people about communicating with people with disabilities.

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Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities

1. **Speak directly to the person, rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.**
2. **Offer to shake hands when introduced.** People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering either hand is an acceptable greeting.
3. **Always identify yourself, and others who may be with you, when meeting someone with a visual disability.** When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When dining with a friend who has a visual disability, ask if you can describe what is on his or her plate.
4. **If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted.** Then listen or ask for instructions.
5. **Treat adults as adults.** Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. **Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair.** Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a service animal from their job without the owner's permission.
7. **Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish.** If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. Allow at least 15 to 20 seconds for a person with a disability to process information and respond.
8. **Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.**
9. **Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his or her attention.** Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking. If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to discriminate your speaking voice. Never shout at a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.
10. **Relax.** Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions, such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.

The Ten Commandments were adapted from many sources as a public service by United Cerebral Palsy Associates, Inc. (UCPA), UCPA's version of the Ten Commandments was updated by Irene M. Ward & Associates (Columbus, Ohio), also as a public service, and to provide the most current language possible for its video of Communicating With People With Disabilities.

Tips for Communicating with...

People who have a visual impairment

- Speak to the person when you approach him or her and don't raise your voice.
- Identify yourself by telling them who you are.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person with whom you are speaking.
- Don't play with a service animal or distract it unless you ask the owner's permission first.
- Let the individual know when you are leaving.
- Don't try to lead the individual without asking permission first. Then, simply let the individual hold your arm and let him or her control his or her own movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions; verbally give the person information that is visually obvious to people who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.

People who have a hearing impairment

- Make sure you get the person's attention before you begin to speak. Just tap the individual on the shoulder if they are not facing you.
 - Always look directly at the person and try to keep your face in the light away from shadows. Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice and avoid chewing gum or smoking while you talk. Try to use short, simple sentences.
 - When the person is using a sign language interpreter, don't speak directly to the interpreter. Always speak directly to the person.
 - If you telephone an individual who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
 - If you do not have a Text Telephone (TTY), dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service. This service can facilitate the call between you and an individual who uses a TTY.
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Tips for Communicating with...

People with Mobility Impairments

- Try to place yourself at eye level with the person by pulling up a chair or leaning forward.
- Don't lean on the wheelchair or other assistive device.
- Do not condescend to a person in a wheelchair by treating them childishly, patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Ask before you assist the person by pushing the wheelchair.
- If a person is having a problem with opening a door, offer to assist him or her.
- When telephoning a person let the phone ring long enough to allow him or her to reach the phone.

People with Speech Impairments

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Take as much time as necessary to communicate and be patient.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate and pay extra attention to help you understand what the individual is saying.
- Don't attempt to help the person by finishing his or her sentences. Let the person speak for himself or herself.
- After trying to understand the person repeatedly, without success, ask the person if it is ok to communicate through writing as an alternative.

People with Cognitive Disabilities

- Move from a public area with lots of distractions to a quieter more private area.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing. People with cognitive disabilities have limited reading/learning skills.
- Avoid phrasing everything as questions that can simply be answered with a "yes" or "no".
- Use short sentences and appropriate words in conversation. Avoid complex words and sentences.
- Allow 15-20 seconds (sometimes even more) to allow individuals to process and respond to information.
- In a non-patronizing way and without over assisting, ask the individual if you can help with filling out forms or explaining written instructions. Wait for the individual to give you permission to assist. Let the individual have extra time for decision making.
- Be patient, flexible, and supportive. Take your time communicating so that everyone understands each other.

Remember:

Relax!

Treat the individual with dignity, respect, and courtesy.

- Listen to the individual.
- Ask if and how you might be of assistance.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

Person First Language

It takes a little practice to comfortably and easily use person first language, but your attention to this detail is respectful to people with disabilities. Person first language places emphasis on the person before the descriptive disability. One would say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person" or say "people with disabilities" rather than "the disabled." For specific disabilities, say "person with Tourette syndrome" or "a person who has cerebral palsy." Still, individuals do have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to use, ask.

Avoid outdated terms like "handicapped" or "crippled." Be aware that many people with disabilities dislike jargon or euphemistic terms like "physically challenged" and "differently abled." Say "uses a wheelchair," rather than "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound." The wheelchair is what enables the person to get around and participate in society; it's liberating, not confining. With any disability, avoid negative, disempowering words, like "victim" or "sufferer." Say "person with AIDS" instead of "AIDS victim" or "person who suffers from AIDS."

Do not worry if you accidentally say "It was good to see you," or "See you later," to a person who is blind. It is an expression that is commonly used and may be indicative of a comfort level you have established with the individual.

EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE

BY KATHIE SNOW; VISIT WWW.DISABILITYISNATURAL.COM TO SEE THE COMPLETE ARTICLE

Remember: a disability descriptor is simply a medical diagnosis; People First Language respectfully puts the person before the disability; and a person with a disability is more *like* people without disabilities than different!

SAY:

People with disabilities.
He has a cognitive disability/diagnosis.
She has autism (or a diagnosis of...)
He has Down syndrome (or a diagnosis of...)
She has a learning disability (diagnosis).
He has a physical disability (diagnosis).
She's of short stature/she's a little person.
He has a mental health condition/diagnosis.
She uses a wheelchair/mobility chair.
He receives special ed services.
She has a developmental delay.
Children without disabilities.
Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.
Customer
Congenital disability
Brain injury
Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.
She needs... or she uses...

INSTEAD OF:

The handicapped or disabled.
He's mentally retarded.
She's autistic.
He's Down's; a mongoloid.
She's learning disabled.
He's a quadriplegic/is crippled.
She's a dwarf/midget.
He's emotionally disturbed/mentally ill.
She's confined to/is wheelchair bound.
He's in special ed.
She's developmentally delayed.
Normal or healthy kids.
Is non-verbal.
Client, consumer, recipient, etc.
Birth defect
Brain damaged
Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.
She has problems with...has special needs.

Keep thinking—there are many other descriptors we need to change!

Excerpted from Kathie's People First Language article, available at www.disabilityisnatural.com.

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Workplace Strategies

Employers who include disability friendly strategies in the workplace enrich and enhance organizational benefits. Such benefits include diversity leadership, innovation, increase in overall morale, and the ability to cast a wider recruiting net. There are several disability friendly strategies for the workplace:

- Make a corporate commitment to include persons with disabilities in your organization. This commitment begins with top management and permeates the organization.
- Dispel myths about people with disabilities through organizational training at all levels. Some myths include lack of productivity, costs of accommodations, and concerns about potential litigation. This education will enable personnel to make informed decisions about disability employment.
- Provide continuous education about disabilities, so personnel can use the up-to-date information to resolve everyday family and workplace situations.
- Form a disability support group and discuss disability perspectives. Through this support group all employees can work to their fullest potentials.
- Make sure all facilities and services are accessible to all employees.
- Provide reasonable accommodations for applicants and workers with disabilities so they can demonstrate their abilities.
- Let community organizations know that your organization is disability friendly.
- Keep disability organizations and agencies informed about potential job openings so they can refer qualified applicants.
- Take advantage of the strengths of having a diverse workforce.
- Hire people with disabilities.
- Provide training and advancement opportunities to workers with disabilities.
- Promote qualified workers with disabilities to upper management positions.
- Employers who are committed to making a difference in the disability employment area will encourage staff to volunteer in the community so they can have a positive influence on future workers with disabilities.

Conclusion

Business is about productivity and maintaining a competitive advantage. To do this, businesses need qualified workers. Hiring people with disabilities adds value to your business and will attract new customers.

Information Compiled From the Following Disability Etiquette Sources

Disability Etiquette. North Dakota Department of Human Services
www.nd.gov/dhs/business/rehabconsult

Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities. United Spinal Association
www.unitedspinal.org

Disability Etiquette Tips. DBTAC Rocky Mountain ADA Center
www.adainformation.org

Examples of People First Language. Disability is Natural. Kathie Snow (2009)
www.disabilityisnatural.com

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