

- To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap him or her on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. If so, place yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, food, and cigarettes away from your mouth when speaking.

Relax

Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use a common expression such as "See you later," or "Did you hear the latest?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. You might be surprised to know that many people who are blind say "See you later!" If you are unsure of what to say or do, don't be afraid to ask questions.

Further Consideration

To find out more about the etiquette of interacting with people with disabilities, please consult the following sources:

National Organization on Disability

www.nod.org

United Spinal Association

www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf

U.S. Dept. of Labor

www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/comucate.htm

VSA arts

www.vsarts.org/x523.xml

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Manners that Matter

An etiquette guide for interacting
with people with disabilities

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agency for persons with disabilities
State of Florida

Words

It is helpful to remember that a person with a disability is—first and foremost—a person. The disability does not define the person. Phrases such as “the disabled,” “the retarded,” or “the blind” are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality or dignity of people with disabilities. So is “normal person,” because the term implies that a person with a disability isn’t normal. Avoid labels.

Instead, use *people-first language*, which emphasizes the person rather than the disability. Examples include “person with a disability,” “person who is blind,” and “person with an intellectual disability.” Positive language affirms and empowers, while negative language limits and segregates. There is no perfect terminology, but as you read the table of phrases below, note how the positive phrases put the person first.

AFFIRMATIVE PHRASES	NEGATIVE PHRASES
person with a disability	the disabled, the handicapped
person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
person who has multiple sclerosis	afflicted by MS
person who is deaf, hard of hearing	the deaf, suffers from a hearing loss
person who is blind, visually impaired	the blind
person with cognitive disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental retardation	the retarded, mentally defective, feeble-minded
person with epilepsy, seizure disorder	epileptic
person who uses a wheelchair	confined or restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
person who is physically disabled	crippled, lame, deformed
person with psychiatric disability	crazy, nuts, the mentally ill
unable to speak, uses synthetic speech	dumb, mute, nonverbal, noncommunicative
successful, productive	has overcome a disability
she says she has a disability	he admits that he has a disability

Actions

If actions speak louder than words, it’s important not to act in a way that shouts your insensitivity! A few simple rules will help you to show your respect and support to a person with disabilities through your actions.

- Speak directly to a person with a disability, rather than to the sign language interpreter or companion.
- When introduced, extend your hand to shake hands with a person with a disability. People with limited hand use or who wear artificial limbs can usually shake hands. A shake with a left hand is perfectly okay.
- When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. In a group setting, identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Leaning or hanging onto a person’s wheelchair is considered annoying. A person who uses a wheelchair, scooter, or cane considers the equipment as part of their personal space.
- When speaking to someone who uses a wheelchair, scooter, or crutches, place yourself at eye-level in front of the person to make conversation.
- Listen attentively when talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than speaking for or correcting him or her. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or perhaps a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.

