



# Communicating With and About People with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act and other legislation, along with the efforts of disability organizations, have begun to improve accessibility in buildings, increase access to education, open employment opportunities, and develop realistic portrayals of persons with disabilities in television programming and motion pictures. However, more progress needs to be made.

Many people still view persons with disabilities as individuals to be pitied, feared, or ignored. These attitudes may arise from discomfort with individuals who are perceived to be different or from a lack of information. Listed below are some suggestions on how to communicate with and about people with disabilities. We must look beyond disability at individuals' abilities and capabilities, things that make each of us unique and worthwhile.

## Words

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as "the blind," "the deaf" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities. Following are examples of positive and negative phrases. Note that the positive phrases put the person first.

### *Affirmative Phrases*

Person with mental retardation  
Person who is blind or visually impaired  
Person with a disability  
Person who is deaf, hard of hearing  
Person who has multiple sclerosis  
Person with cerebral palsy  
Person with epilepsy, seizure disorder  
Person who uses a wheelchair  
Person who has muscular dystrophy  
Physically disabled  
Unable to speak, uses synthetic speech  
Seizure  
Person with psychiatric disability  
Person who no longer lives in an institution  
Person without a disability  
Has overcome disability

### *Negative Phrases*

Retarded, mentally defective  
The blind  
The disabled, handicapped  
Suffered a hearing loss, the deaf  
Afflicted by MS  
CP victim  
Epileptic  
Confined or restricted to a wheelchair  
Stricken by MD  
Crippled, lame, deformed  
Dumb, mute  
Fit  
Crazy, nuts  
The deinstitutionalized  
Normal (implies person with a disability isn't)  
Courageous (if it implies person has courage simply because of having a disability)

## Actions

### *The Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities*

- I.** When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.
- II.** When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is acceptable.)

**III.** When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.

**IV.** If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.

**V.** 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.).

**VI.** Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning on hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.

**VII.** Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.

**VIII.** When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.

**IX.** To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person 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. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

**X.** Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you are unsure of what to do.