

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Disability Etiquette in the Workplace

When working with a person with a disability, you may feel unsure at first about what to say, how to interact, or the best ways to communicate and work together. Learning and observing the simple rules of disability etiquette will help reduce any awkwardness, making your workplace relationships effective and respectful for all concerned.

What is a disability?

A person with a disability has a physical or mental impairments that have long-term effects on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. These can be physically evident, but they can also be non-visible. Non-visible disabilities include PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), autism, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder, to name just a few.

The language of disability

Words and language are constantly changing. A word that was acceptable a few years ago may be considered insulting today. You may not always know what terms are and are not appropriate, polite, or show sensitivity. It's extremely important to use appropriate and respectful language when speaking with, and about, people with disabilities. The following is a list of terms that are accepted and appropriate, and a list of words to avoid.

One guiding principle to keep in mind is: person first, disability second. Use language that focuses on the person, not just the disability. Always put the person first and the disability second—say "people with disabilities" rather than using the word collectively ("the disabled" or "disabled people"). Say "manager who is deaf" rather than "deaf manager." Following are lists of terms to use and terms to avoid.

Recommended terms are:

- person with a disability
- person with a mental health disability
- person who is deaf; person who is deaf and communicates through sign language or writing
- person with [condition] (e.g. a brain injury, epilepsy, paraplegia, a learning disability, etc.)
- congenital disability (as opposed to "birth defect")
- little person, person of short stature
- person without disabilities (as opposed to "normal")

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Terms to avoid are:

- handicap and handicapped—both suggest a lack of productive ability and should not be used
- invalid
- physically challenged
- crippled
- lame
- wheelchair-bound
- retarded
- deaf and dumb; deaf mute
- brain damaged
- birth defect
- dwarf, midget
- ·normal

12 Helpful Reminders

1. Avoid stereotypes.
Just as no two people are alike, so are no two people with disabilities alike. Even two people with similar impairments are not the same. They may deal with their disabilities differently and approach their work tasks in very different ways. For example, one person might compensate for a cognitive disability by using visual thinking, while another with the same disability might prefer to have instructions read aloud.

- Don't make assumptions.
- Don't assume that you need to speak slowly or loudly to a person who speaks with difficulty, or that you need to always be cheerful around someone with major depression, or that you need to assist someone who is blind or who uses mobility devices (unless they ask for help).
- Don't assume a person who has difficulty speaking has difficulty thinking. A disability that affects speech does not indicate reduced intelligence.
- Don't assume non-visible disabilities are less "real" or "legitimate" than visible disabilities. Similarly, don't assume people with non-visible disabilities do not deserve accommodations in the workplace.

2. Recognize different approaches to getting work done.
There are many different ways to get the job done. Work styles differ even among people without disabilities — for example, some people work slowly and steadily, others in concentrated bursts of activity. It's the same for with people with disabilities. For example, a person with a cognitive disability may perform some tasks better with picture-based charts than with written words. Both these ways of working can be valid as long as the task gets done safely and effectively.

3. Don't treat people differently because of a disability.
Generally speaking, people with disabilities want to be treated like anyone else. Don't treat a person with a disability with special sympathy or exaggerated care. Don't assume people with disabilities are heroes or sources of inspiration. Treat adults as adults—with respect and consideration and without prejudice.

4. Respect confidentiality.
When a person shares information with you about a disability, treat the information as confidential.

5. Personal space.

- Treat wheelchairs and other devices (such as crutches, communication boards, or other assistive devices) as if they were a part of the person's body.
- Don't reach into someone's personal space or touch their belongings unless they request it.
- Similarly do not interact with a service animal unless asked.
- If it appears that a person with a disability is really struggling, quietly ask if there is anything you can do to help. Then, take your cue from the person as to what they need. Unless there is a situation of immediate danger, do not provide help (such as pushing a wheelchair or leading a person with a visual disability) unless you are asked.

6. Communicate effectively.

- Always speak directly to a colleague who has a disability, even if a companion or sign-language interpreter is present.
- When speaking with a colleague who uses crutches or a wheelchair, position yourself at eye level whenever possible.

7. Communicate if you have an issue or concern.
If a colleague's disability is having a negative effect on your work, speak up about it. It's always better to discuss issues in the open rather than keep them to yourself and let it affect productivity or cause bad feelings. For example, if a colleague's disability is making it hard for you to understand what they are saying, discuss ways to communicate more effectively together.

8. Identify yourself and others.
When speaking with someone who is visually impaired, tell them who is present. If you're in a group, tell them whom you're speaking to. Don't talk to, touch, or distract a service animal unless you have permission.

9. Listen attentively and don't show impatience.
When approaching a colleague who has a hearing impairment, tap them on the shoulder or wave to get their attention, and then position yourself so they can see your face. With any colleague whose hearing or speech is impaired, listen attentively, be patient, don't try to speak for them, and don't pretend you've understood something when you haven't—ask clarifying questions politely as needed. If the person is wearing a hearing aid, speak in a normal tone, don't shout, and if they haven't understood you, try to speak more clearly or rephrase.

10. Don't be shy about shaking hands.
Don't hesitate to offer to shake hands with someone who has an artificial limb or limited hand use. It's fine to shake with left hands.

11. Be inclusive.
If you're planning a work-related social event or outing, choose locations and activities that can include all colleagues.

12. Relax and reach out.
Sometimes, people with disabilities are avoided because others feel uncomfortable or fear they will do something wrong. This can isolate people with disabilities in the workplace. Reach out to people with disabilities as you would with anyone else. Joke about the weather; find out what they're interested in; ask about their families. Connecting with the person and not the disability is the real spirit of disability etiquette.

Increasingly, people with both visible and non-visible disabilities are in our workplaces. A little time spent learning the rules of disability etiquette will go a long way toward creating smooth, productive working relationships that benefit everyone.