

## Tips for Engaging with Different Disabilities

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### Remember

- Not all disabilities are visible, such as heart disease, depression, or asthma.
- Many people have temporary disabilities which are equally as limiting as permanent disabilities.
- Not everyone with a disability wishes to discuss it or its limitations. Wait until you know an individual before asking personal questions.

### Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing

- Tap someone who is deaf on the shoulder or wave your hand to get their attention.
- Write notes if you don't sign (short sentences; common words).
- Look directly at the person while speaking and don't obscure your mouth; try to limit gum chewing.
- Don't accept a head nod for understanding.
- Talk directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- Speak in a normal speed and tone unless asked to do otherwise.
- Avoid standing in front of a light source.
- Do not walk between two people using sign language as you will be cutting off their conversation.
- Try to be expressive in your body language, gestures, and facial expressions.

### Wheelchair Users/Mobility

- Position yourself at the same eye level by sitting down if engaged in a long conversation with someone who uses a chair.
- Treat the chair as part of the user's personal space; do not touch or lean on the chair.
- Ask before giving assistance to a wheelchair user and take "No" for an answer.
- Feel free to use words like "run" or "walk." Wheelchair users use these words, too.
- Be aware of architectural features which may cause difficulty for wheelchair users, such as steps or insufficiently wide doors.
- Remember that some parking spaces are reserved for people with mobility limitations. They are not a luxury; they are a necessity.
- Direct your comments to the individual, not their companion or care attendant.
- Never pet, feed, or otherwise distract a service animal without first obtaining permission from the owner.

### Speech and Language

- Allow time for the person to speak, as they may need more time to respond to you.
- Avoid the urge to interrupt or complete a sentence for the person.
- Ask for repetition if you do not understand what the person said.
- Do not fake understanding.
- Be aware that you may need to use a variety of communication methods such as writing notes, emailing, or technological option.
- Be patient and encourage the person toward expression.



## Learning Disability/ADHD

- Understand that learning disabilities may impact a person's reading, writing, math, memory, and/or information process.
- Realize that this is rarely visible evident of learning disabilities.
- Use multiple methods to deliver information.
- Minimize environment distractions (screen savers, background noises, etc.).
- Keep in mind that an unconventional response may be influenced by a processing difficulty which affects social interaction.

## Blindness and Visual Impairment

- Understand that legally blind people may have some vision.
- Provide very explicit and specific directions if asked. Avoid using such terms as "over there" or "turn this way."
- Never pet, feed, or otherwise distract a service animal without first getting permission from the owner.
- Provide class information in accessible, electronic formats to support the individual in using their technology to speak aloud.
- Feel free to use words like "see" and "look."
- Offer your arm/elbow when leading someone who is blind.
- Place the person's hand on the side or back of the chair when seating them.

## Chronic or Acute Health

*Examples: Cancer, Asthma, Emphysema, Diabetes, HIV/AIDS, Sickle Cell*

- Understand that each person has unique set of symptoms and treatments.
- Accept that many health conditions are often invisible to others.
- Never define the person by the condition. For example, someone should be referred to as "the girl who has cancer"; not "the cancer girl."
- Do not treat the person as if they are contagious.

## Neurological

*Examples: Cerebral Palsy, Seizures, MS, Tourette, Muscular Dystrophy, TBI (traumatic brain injury)*

- Know that some of the conditions will have symptoms that look like mobility issues. Others may have similar effects as learning disabilities.
- Understand that someone may look like they have no disability.

## Psychological

- Understand that social skills may be impaired.
- Be sensitive to emotional stress or triggers.
- Be patient.



- Set clear boundaries for people repeatedly interacting with you. For example, “Thanks, Bob, for stopping by. If you want to chat, you need to make an appointment first.”

## Cognitive

- Be very clear and specific in your language. Sarcasm and subtle humor is often missed.
- Present instructions in a clear, easy to understand way.
- Present oral information at a measured pace using pauses as appropriate to encourage understanding.
- Offer cues to help with transitions like “we have 5 minutes left until our meeting is done.”
- Reinforce information in multiple formats.
- Employ modeling, rehearsing, and role-playing to help student learn appropriate interactions.
- Keep in mind that an unconventional response may be influenced by a cognitive difficulty which affects social interaction.

## In Case of Emergency

- Be aware of a person with disability in emergency situations. It may be necessary to alert someone who is deaf to a fire alarm or lead someone who is blind out of a building.
- Stay calm. Do your best to keep yourself and others safe.
- Remember that people with disabilities are not helpless. Offer help, but only give it when accepted or requested.
- Use first aid and other emergency responses according to your training.