

Etiquette Tips That Fight Discrimination

Much of the discrimination against the disabled stems from the uncertainty that the non-disabled feel when they first meet someone with a disability. Many organizations, like the National Easter Seal Society, offer brochures with tips on proper etiquette for interacting with people with disabilities.

Language should emphasize the person first, the disability second. For example, rather than refer to someone as an epileptic, say "person with epilepsy" or "John. who has epilepsy...." Avoid language that is negative and inaccurate. For example, people who use wheelchairs are not "bound" or "confined" to their chairs. And, while a person may have spastic muscles, he or she is not spastic.

Preferred language includes the use of:

- "Has" or "with" instead of "crippled with," "suffering from," "afflicted with." For example, say "John has epilepsy" rather than "John is suffering from epilepsy."
- Congenital disability rather than "birth defect."
- Non-disabled rather than "normal," "healthy" or "able-bodied."
- "Condition" rather than "disease" or "defect."
- "Visually impaired" rather than "blind" if a person is not totally impaired.
- "Deaf" or "hard of hearing" rather than "hearing impaired" if a person is not totally impaired.
- "Little person" or "dwarf" rather than "midget." - Other offensive terms and phrases include "victim," "cripple," "crippling," "unfortunate," "dumb," "deaf mute," "mute," "deformed," "blind as a bat," "invalid," "pitiful," "poor," "deaf and moron" and "feeble-minded."

Stereotypes of individuals with disabilities as "courageous," "brave," "inspiration" or as "sensitive," "bitter" and "full of self-pity" also are offensive. Other etiquette tips that might help interviewers, supervisors or co-workers are:

- Never help a person with a disability until you have asked if he or she needs or wants help and have received an affirmative reply. If the person does want assistance, ask for specific instructions on how you can be most helpful.
- Look directly at any person with a disability when talking to him or her, even if the person has an interpreter present.
- A speech impairment does not indicate that the person also has a hearing impairment or intellectual limitations. Someone with a speech impairment should be allowed to finish his or her own sentences. But the non-disabled person might consider asking questions in a form that allows for short answers or a nod of the head.
- For extended conversation with someone using a wheelchair, get a chair and sit at eye level with the person.

- Keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth while talking to a person who is lip reading. Use gestures and speak clearly, but don't exaggerate lip movements or shout. An interpreter may be helpful for group meetings, even if the deaf person reads lips.
- Avoid any tendency to shout while speaking to someone who is visually impaired. There is no need to avoid the use of verbs like "see". When walking with a person who is visually impaired, allow that person to set the pace. If the person asks for or accepts your offer of help, don't grab his or her arm. It is easier for him or her to hold onto your arm.

Taken from Business Insurance, July 13, 1992, p. 16, "Etiquette Tips Fight Discrimination", by Sara J Harty.

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