Disability Etiquette:
Treat Everyone with Respect
Disability etiquette promotes goodwill and respect among all people. It helps make society more inclusive for everyone.

People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the United States. At some point in our lives, most of us will develop a disability, know someone who has one, or both. Disability affects everyone – all ages, genders, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

**General Disability Etiquette**

- People know what they can and cannot do. You should not assume a person with a disability needs help.
- Sometimes a person may want help. It’s always OK to ask. If they accept help, wait for their instructions.
- When you greet someone with a disability, greet them the same way you would anyone else.
- Speak to the person the way you would like to be spoken to. Talk directly to the person, not their caregiver or assistant.
- Be respectful. No one wants to be talked down to. Be as formal or as familiar with the person as you are with anyone else.
- People appreciate their privacy. Only ask if you may discuss a person’s disability if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Some people need extra time to gather their thoughts. Please be patient and let them set the pace.
- Service animals are working. You should not pet or try to distract a service animal.
- It’s OK to use common phrases such as: “See you later,” “Gotta run,” or “Did you hear about that?” Chances are the person with a disability will understand.

**How to Communicate with Respect**

Words are powerful. They can create beliefs, influence feelings and decisions, impact people’s daily lives, and even influence social policy. Using respectful, positive terminology shows people with disabilities that they have a role in the community like everyone else.
Put People First

Disability etiquette is respectful communication and interaction with people with disabilities. It involves putting the person first, and not their disability.

There are two common types of language preferences: “People First” and “Identity First.” People First language emphasizes the person, not their disability. Identity First language recognizes disability as an inherent part of an individual’s identity. If A.J. has been diagnosed with autism, People First language would state: “A.J. is a person with autism.” Identity First language would state: “A.J. is autistic.” In addition, many people consider being deaf as their cultural or linguistic identity. It can be offensive to use “hearing impaired” or “disabled.” The terms “deaf” or “hard of hearing” may be more acceptable.

If you are unsure, People First language is the standard way to communicate with and about people with disabilities.

Stop Stereotypes

We can all stop using degrading and outdated words and terms, such as: crippled, retarded, differently-abled, and physically challenged. These words are hurtful. They keep stereotypes and negative attitudes alive.

Let’s not call people “victims” or “heroic” because they live with a disability. Everyone faces challenges in life, but that doesn’t necessarily make them heroic.

Etiquette Tips for Specific Disabilities

**Mobility Disability**

- People like to be at eye level with other people. It’s respectful to be at eye level when talking at length to a person who uses a wheelchair or crutches.
- A mobility device is part of a person’s personal space. Do not lean on or hang onto a person’s device.
- People may use doors or chairs for support. They will let you know if they want a door opened or a chair pulled out.
- A building may have many entrances or inside routes. Keep accessible entrances and routes clearly marked, unlocked, and free from barriers.
- When giving directions, consider barriers, such as stairs, hills, weather, distance, and the person’s own limitations.
- The height of a table or a counter may present a barrier.
- Consider placement of items on a countertop. Ensure all items are within reach.
**Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

- Use the following to communicate effectively: easy-to-understand words, concrete concepts, pictures, and visual aids.
- Information is easier to understand when larger ideas are broken into smaller parts.
- Let them set the pace. Sometimes people may need time to adjust to change.
- Patience works. Use repetition and recap the key points at the end of the conversation.
- Be observant and try asking questions in different ways to check that you have been understood and that you understand the person.
- Quick decisions may be difficult. People appreciate having adequate time to decide. It might take as long as 15-20 seconds.

**Visual Disability**

- Before you speak, identify yourself and anyone else who is present. Let others know before you leave a group or a room.
- If you are speaking in a group, identify the person you are talking with, as well as yourself.
- It’s OK to offer to read information to a person.
- Some people with low vision may ask for large-print materials.
- If someone is used to your location, but you’ve recently moved furniture or are in a new location, offer to reorient the individual. Describe their surroundings.
- If you’ve been asked to provide assistance, consider the following:
  - Do not push or pull a person.
  - Offer your arm, wait until they take your arm, and walk slightly ahead and alongside the person.
  - Describe barriers ahead. Be specific, for example: “There is a crack in the sidewalk in about five feet”.
  - If approaching stairs, guide the person’s hand to the handrail.
  - When helping someone take a seat, guide their hand to the back or arm of the chair.
Hearing Disability

• Want a person’s attention? It is OK to step into a person’s line of vision or wave your hand.
• Speak at a natural volume.
• Ask the individual: “How do you prefer to communicate?”
• Look directly at the person when you talk to them. Do this even if the person is using a sign language interpreter.
• If the person lip reads, speak slowly, clearly, and expressively. Keep your mouth in full view and in good light.
• If you are not understood, rephrase your sentence instead of repeating yourself.
• Many people in the deaf community may find it offensive when the terms “hearing impaired” or “disabled” are used. The terms “deaf” or “hard of hearing” may be more acceptable.

Speech Disability

• Patience is key. Wait for a person to finish speaking.
• If you have difficulty understanding, repeat what you believe was said, and ask the person to confirm. Don’t pretend to understand. If necessary, ask short questions.
• If you have trouble understanding someone’s speech, it is OK to ask the person to write it down. You could also suggest another way to communicate.
• Ask one question at a time. Give the person enough time to answer. Do not interrupt.
• If a person uses an assistive technology device, it should be within reach.

Hidden Disability

Some disabilities are invisible or not obvious. Some examples include:

• Learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, mental illness, and chronic conditions.
• Trouble walking long distances, climbing stairs, reaching objects, or remembering things.
• Loss of muscle control or mobility that is not obvious.
• Poor impulse control.
• Physical – for example, degenerative bone or joint diseases.
Consider these tips for hidden disabilities

- Provide enough seating in meetings, waiting areas, and when you meet for social engagements.
- If walking with someone, walk at their pace.
- Ask a person if they would like help to reach or lift an object.
- Follow the person’s lead. The person may ask you to write down directions or they may ask for a chair while they’re waiting in line. They may have a learning disability or a chronic condition that contributes to fatigue.
- Certain conditions can interfere with a person’s ability to think, feel, or relate to others. Again, being patient or allowing more time shows respect.

Sensory Processing Disability and Chemical Sensitivities

To respect people with a sensory processing disability, consider the following:

- Be aware some events maybe be overstimulating or overwhelming. Examples are: being in large groups, being around bright lights, and hearing sudden noises.
- Offer quiet places at events, some people may need to take sensory breaks. This could be a quiet room, or if the event is outdoors, an area away from the noise, lights, and crowds.

To respect people with chemical sensitivities, communities should:

- Encourage fragrance-free public events.
- Be mindful when using pesticides, cleansers, scented oils, and room fresheners. Be aware of the timing of installing new carpet or paint.
- Maintain good ventilation and airflow.
- Enforce “no smoking” policies.

Bringing it Together

People with disabilities are people first and foremost. People with disabilities should be treated with the same respect as people without disabilities. Whenever you are in doubt on how to communicate with or respond to someone, watch for the person’s lead. Whenever you’re unsure it’s OK to ask.

Learn More

For more information about disability, and promoting health and wellness among people with disability, contact the New York State Department of Health, Disability and Health Program at (518) 408-5142, or send an email to: DHP@health.ny.gov. Visit: www.health.ny.gov/community/disability/.