

Working with People with DisAbilities

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Overall attitude and approach to persons with disabilities

As you meet people with various disabilities, you will likely find that you are apprehensive about how you should behave towards that individual. Every person is different and some will find it easy to work with such individuals, whereas others will find it difficult adjusting to working with people with disabilities. Always remember that a person with a disability is a person

The most important thing is to be honest

If you do not understand someone because they have difficulty with their speech, or they use some form of communication aid, please do not assume that they do not understand. If you have difficulty understanding them, then admit it, and try to get someone to translate for you. People in such situations will not get upset if you are honest, and in time, you will learn to understand what they are saying to you.

How to help

- Introduce yourself and offer assistance.
- Don't be offended if your help is not needed.
- Ask how you can help and listen for instructions.
- Be courteous, but NOT condescending.
- Assist disabled persons when necessary or requested, but do not discourage their active participation.
- Allow a person DIGNITY to do what he or she wants to do for him or herself.

Things to remember

- Treat people as you would like to be treated yourself.
- People with disabilities are NOT alike and have a wide variety of skills and personalities. We are all individuals.
- Most people with disabilities are not sick, incompetent, dependent, unintelligent or contagious.
- Do not tell the person with the disability you know someone with the same disability or ask them if they know so and so. People with the same disability do not all know each other.

- The wheelchair is part of the user's personal space. It is not a leaning post.
- Do not pet a service animal as it is working not a companion.

When you meet a non-vocal person

- Some non-vocal people prefer to write their communications down on paper, some use sign-language and some use a sign board. These methods can be slow and require patience and concentration. You may have to handle much of the conversation yourself
- Try to keep in mind that communication is the important thing
- You might try using more yes/no questions

Suggestions for communicating with people using communication aides

1. Expect non-verbal people to communicate
2. Ask the person to show how they indicate "yes". Once you have noted this, ask them how they indicate "no".
3. Find out if they:
 - a. feel like talking to you, and
 - b. have the time to talk with you
4. If there are instructions visible for communicating with this person, take a moment to read them
5. Make sure the person's communication system is within their reach
6. Find out how the person "points" (with their finger, eyes, fist, etc.)
7. Ask one question at a time
8. Ask open-ended, rather than yes/no questions, whenever appropriate
9. Wait for a response

Touching

Do not touch a person with a disability unless there is a good reason (such as shaking hands in greeting or if the person has requested assistance). However, you may gently touch a deaf person to get his attention. Never push a person's wheelchair without his or her permission. Acceptance means a lot.