

“Disability Etiquette”

❖ *Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities*



Introduction*

The national organization on disability reports that more than 54 million Americans have a disability. This information is for anyone—with or without a disability—who wants to interact more effectively with people with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 was conceived with the goal of integrating people with disabilities into all aspects of American life, particularly the workplace and the marketplace. Sensitivity toward people with disabilities is not only in the spirit of the ADA, it makes good business sense. Practicing disability etiquette is an easy way to make people with disabilities feel welcome.

You don't have to feel awkward when dealing with a person who has a disability. This information provides some basic tips for you to follow. And if you are ever unsure how to interact with a person who has a disability, just ask!

The Basics *

Ask before you help

Just because someone has a disability, don't assume she needs help. If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people. Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it. And if she does want help, ask how before you act.

Be sensitive about physical contact

Some people with disabilities depend on their arms for balance. Grabbing them—even if your intention is to assist—could knock them off balance. Avoid patting a person on the head or touching his wheelchair, scooter or cane. People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space.

Think before you speak

Always speak directly to the person with a disability, not to his companion, aide or sign language interpreter. Making small talk with a person who has a disability is great; just talk to him as you would with anyone else. Respect his privacy. If you ask about his disability, he may feel like you are treating him as a disability, not as a human being. (However, many people with disabilities are comfortable with children's natural curiosity and do not mind if a child asks them questions.)

Don't make assumptions

People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make decisions for them about participating in any activity. Depending on the situation, it could be a violation of the ADA to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations.

Respond graciously to requests

When people who have a disability ask for an accommodation at your business, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough in your establishment to ask for what they need. And if they get a positive response, they will probably come back again and tell their friends about the good service they received.

Terminology Tips*

Put the person first. Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.” Say “people with disabilities” rather than “the disabled.” For specific disabilities, saying “person with Tourette syndrome” or “person who has cerebral palsy” is usually a safe bet. Still, individuals do have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to use, ask.

Avoid outdated terms like “handicapped” or “crippled.” Be aware that many people with disabilities dislike jargony, euphemistic terms like “physically challenged” and “differently abled.” Say “wheelchair user,” rather than “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound.” The wheelchair is what enables the person to get around and participate in society; it’s liberating, not confining.

With any disability, avoid negative, disempowering words, like “victim” or “sufferer.” Say “person with AIDS” instead of “AIDS victim” or “person who suffers from AIDS.”

It’s okay to use idiomatic expressions when talking to people with disabilities. For example, saying, “It was good to see you,” and “See you later,” to a person who is blind is completely acceptable; they use these expressions themselves all the time!

Many people who are Deaf communicate with sign language and consider themselves to be members of a cultural and linguistic minority group. They refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital “D,” and may be offended by the term “hearing impaired.” Others may not object to the term, but in general it is safest to refer to people who have hearing loss but who communicate in spoken language as “hard of hearing” and to people with profound hearing losses as Deaf or deaf.

A Final Word*

People with disabilities are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, and problems and joys. While the disability is an integral part of who they are, it alone does not define them. Don’t make them into disability heroes or victims. Treat them as individuals.

(*Information from United Spinal Association Booklet “Disability Etiquette”)

For Further Information:

Diocese of Buffalo – Office of the Disabled –website – Information on programs and activities for the disabled in the Catholic Diocese. <http://www.buffalodiocese.org/outreach/disabilities/tabid/211/default.aspx> For more information, contact Sharon Urbaniak at 847-5514

United Spinal Association website: www.unitedspinal.org --the booklet “Disability Etiquette” can be viewed online or downloaded for free. Other FREE booklets and information are also available on various subjects at the website.

Erie County – Office for the Disabled (716) 858-6215- Clearinghouse for information on programs and services available to citizens with disabilities.

Developmental Disabilities Alliance of WNY- Guide to Services – www.ddawny.org

Information courtesy of

St. Anthony’s Respect Life Committee