



Disability Etiquette

Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities



Adapt Achieve Inspire

United Spinal Association

- **Mission Statement**

- United Spinal Association is dedicated to improving the quality of life for all Americans with spinal cord injuries and disorders.

- **About Us**

- For over 60 years, we have fought for veteran's rights and for the rights of all individuals with disabilities. We played a significant role in writing the Americans with Disabilities Act, and made important contributions to the Fair Housing Amendments Act and the Air Carrier Access Act.
 - Our initiatives in research and education, government policy and legislation, civil rights and advocacy, accessibility and architectural design, and competitive athletics ensure that veterans and all Americans with spinal cord injuries and disorders live healthier, more independent and productive lives as active members of their communities.
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Interesting Fact

- **The national organization on disability reports that MORE THAN 54 MILLION Americans have a disability.**
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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.
 - **Think Before You Speak**
 - Always speak directly to the person. Making small talk is great! 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.
 - **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.
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More Basics

- **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.
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Terminology Tip

- **Put the Person First and Be Careful with Your Words.**
 - Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.”
 - Avoid outdated terms like “handicapped” or “crippled”
 - Say “wheelchair user” rather than “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound.”
 - Avoid negative disempowering words like “victim” or “sufferer.” Say “person with AIDS” instead of “AIDS victim.”
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People Who Use Wheelchairs or Have Mobility Impairments

- Wheelchair users are people, not equipment.
 - Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair; it's part of their personal space.
 - Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked.
 - Be aware of wheelchair users' reach limits.
 - If a service counter is too high for a wheelchair user to see over, step around it to provide service
 - People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so never grab them.
 - Don't ask a wheelchair user to hold things for you—respect their personal space.
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People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

- Identify yourself before you make physical contact.
 - If a new customer or employee is blind or visually impaired, offer him a tour of the facility.
 - People who are blind need their arms for balance, so offer you arm—don't take his—if he needs to be guided.
 - If the person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite of the dog.
 - If you are giving directions, give specific, nonvisual information.
 - Do not touch the person's cane or guide dog.
 - Offer to read written information to customers who are blind.
 - Keep walkways clear of obstruction.
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People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- When using an interpreter, look directly at the person who is deaf, and maintain eye contact. Talk directly to the person, not the interpreter.
 - Include people who are deaf in the decision-making process; don't decide for them.
 - Make sure you have their attention before speaking.
 - Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person does not understand.
 - When talking, face the person.
 - Speak clearly and do not shout.
 - Do not obscure your face when communicating.
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People With Speech Disabilities

- Give the person your full attention.
 - If unsure, repeat for verification.
 - If, after trying, you still cannot understand them, suggest another way of facilitating communication.
 - A quiet environment makes communication easier.
 - Don't tease or laugh at a person with a speech disability.
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Persons of Short Stature

- Be aware of having necessary items within the persons reach to the maximum extent possible.
 - Be aware that persons of short stature count on being able to use equipment that is at their height.
 - Never pet or kiss a person of short stature on the head.
 - Communication can be easier when people are at the same level; kneel or stand back to make eye contact.
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People With Cerebral Palsy

- Many people with CP have slurred speech and involuntary body movements.
 - Follow the tips for interacting with persons who have speech disabilities.
 - Monitor your responses and interact with the person as you would with anyone else.
 - A person who may appear to be drunk, sick, or have a medical emergency might in fact have CP.
 - Get the facts before acting on your first impression.
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Tourette Syndrome

- If a person with Tourette makes vocalizations during a conversation, simply wait for her to finish, then calmly continue.
 - The more the person tries to contain these urges, the more the urges build up. It may be helpful for them to have the option to temporarily leave and release the build-up in a private place.
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People Who Look Different

- Everyone needs to have a positive self-image to be a fully participating member of society.
 - Be sure that you don't contribute to stigmatizing people who look different.
 - If you see someone who fits this description, just give him a smile. 😊
 - If the situation is appropriate, strike up a conversation and include the person in whatever is going on.
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Hidden Disabilities

- Not all disabilities are apparent...
 - A person may make a request or act in a way that seems strange to you. That request or behavior may be disability-related.
 - Even though these disabilities are hidden, they are real. Please respect the person's needs and requests whenever possible.
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Epilepsy (Seizure) Disorders

- Epilepsy is a neurological condition characterized by seizures that happen when the electrical system of the brain malfunctions.
 - If a person has a seizure, you cannot do anything to stop it. If they have fallen, be sure their head is protected and wait for the seizure to end.
 - When the seizure has ended, the person may feel disoriented and embarrassed. Try to ensure that they have privacy to collect themselves.
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Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) and Respiratory Disabilities

- People with MCS and respiratory disabilities react to toxins in the air.
 - Try to avoid spray-cleaning tables, windows or other surfaces while people are present.
 - Maintain good ventilation and overall good indoor air quality.
 - Second-hand smoke can be particularly harmful to people with a respiratory disability.
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HIV and AIDS

- People with Human Immunodeficiency Virus or Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome have impaired immune systems, so their bodies have trouble fighting off infections.
 - You can't catch HIV from casual contact—don't be afraid of touching.
 - A person with HIV or AIDS, however, is at significant risk of picking up an airborne infection.
 - Many people with AIDS feel stigmatized.
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Psychiatric Disabilities (Mental Illness)

- People with psychiatric disabilities may at times have difficulty coping with the tasks and interactions of daily life.
 - One of the main obstacles they face is the attitudes that people have about them.
 - Stress can affect the person's ability to function.
 - People who have psychiatric disabilities have varying personalities and different ways of coping with their disability.
 - In a crisis, stay calm and be supportive as you would with anyone else.
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Cognitive Disabilities: Mental Retardation

- People with mental retardation learn slowly. They have a hard time using what they have learned and applying it from one setting or situation to another.
 - Speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple words and concrete concepts.
 - Don't use baby talk or talk down to them.
 - Remember that the person is an adult, and unless you are informed otherwise, can make their own decisions.
 - It can be difficult for them to make quick decisions—be patient.
 - People with mental retardation rely on routine—remember that adjustments may take time.
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Cognitive Disabilities: Learning Disabilities

- Learning disabilities are lifelong disorders that interfere with a person's ability to receive, express or process information.
 - Give verbal explanations and allow extra time for reading.
 - Don't be surprised if you tell someone very simple instructions and he requests that you write them down.
 - Ask the person how you can best relay information.
 - It may be easier for the person to function in a quiet environment without distractions.
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Cognitive Disabilities: Traumatic

- People with traumatic brain injury have had damage to the brain usually as the result of trauma, such as an accident or stroke.
 - Keep in mind that they may have a loss of muscle control or mobility that is not obvious.
 - May have poor impulse control.
 - May be unable to follow directions due to poor short-term memory.
 - May have trouble concentrating or organizing their thoughts
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Emergency Evacuation Procedures

- People with disabilities must be considered in any facility's evacuation plan.
 - Compile a voluntary list of people with disabilities who are regulars at you facility.
 - Interview each individual on the list to plan the most effective way to assist them in case of an emergency.
 - Practice the evacuation procedures and keep your plans up to date.
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Conflict Management

- Sometimes conflicts arise between people with disabilities and the places they visit for fun, work, health care, or education.
 - All of these situations call for flexibility, patience, creativity, and open communication—a willingness to listen to the other guy's perspective and to learn.
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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.*
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