



Communicating with People with Disabilities



acknowledgements

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*Cover: Michael Delaney, 'Wave' 2005. Acrylic paint on canvas.
This page: Tammy Delaney, part of 'Bubbles' 2005.
Watercolour and oil pastel on paper.*



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communicating with people with a disability

It is not uncommon for some of us to be uncomfortable around people with disabilities. We may be unsure of what to do, how to act, what is correct, and what will offend. The most effective strategy is to be sensitive, flexible and honest. A lack of sensitivity or flexibility makes the situation awkward, and may cause unintentional discrimination. Acknowledging feelings of awkwardness assists us to learn. Talking about disability is often difficult, partly because the appropriate terminology is unclear and often laden with negative connotations.

The most appropriate terminology, “person with a disability,” puts the emphasis on the person, not the limitation or disability. Treat people as people. Address people who have disabilities by their first names, only when extending the same familiarity to others.

Don’t assume you know what the disability is. Many different conditions can present in similar ways. Some disabilities are “invisible” – they are not immediately obvious when you are speaking to the person, but they may still face challenges in communicating with you. Relate to the individual person and respond to their individual needs.

Different cultures also view disability differently and may not share the common view of disability as a physical or physiological issue. Be aware that people from other cultures may be embarrassed if you draw attention to the person with a disability.

Above all, be respectful, polite, and considerate, offer assistance, communicate effectively and don’t hesitate to ask questions. Treat all people in the same way you would wish to be treated yourself.

terminology and communication tips

Say:

- ✓ Person with a disability
- ✓ Person with cerebral palsy or vision impairment
- ✓ Person with a physical disability
- ✓ Person who uses a wheelchair
- ✓ Person with a hearing impairment, hearing loss,
- ✓ Accessible parking, accessible toilets etc.

Avoid Saying:

- ✗ Victim, suffers from, deformed
- ✗ Afflicted by/with or blind/ can't see etc.
- ✗ Crippled, the crippled, crippling, invalid
- ✗ Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair
- ✗ Deaf and dumb, deaf mute, person who is deaf
- ✗ Disabled parking, handicapped toilets, etc.

Do:

- ✓ Look at the person when addressing him or her.
- ✓ Ask the person about the best way to communicate if you are unsure.
- ✓ Speak directly to a person with a disability, even if a person without a disability accompanies him or her.
- ✓ If you know the person's name, address the person by their name.
- ✓ Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but don't assume a person with a disability needs or will accept it. Wait for acceptance and instruction before proceeding. Respect people's wishes.
- ✓ Extend your hand to shake when meeting someone.
- ✓ Remember that people whose first language is not English may not recognise words like 'disability' or 'impairment' and you may need to be flexible and descriptive in your language to help them understand.

people who have a vision impairment



- > DON'T SHOUT. Vision problems and hearing loss are not necessarily related impairments.
- > When meeting, identify yourself and others with you.
- > When conversing in a group address people by name.
- > If you know the person's name, address the person by their name so that they realise they are being spoken to.
- > Offer assistance if it appears necessary but pay attention to the person's response – take your cues from him or her.
- > Be specific with verbal directions to places and avoid comments like, "Over there...". Direct the person who has vision impairment to THEIR left or right, not yours.
- > Do not presume that the person can't see anything. If appropriate it is OK to ask what they can see.
- > When preparing printed information, for a person with low vision it is best to seek their advice for their preferred format for personal documents. General information for people with low vision should be provided in **Arial 18 point bold**.
- > The lighting needs of people with vision loss differ and may be significant. Many people see much more with stronger light and others do not. The most common concern is glare.
- > Walk alongside and slightly ahead of the person, don't hold onto the person's arm, allow them to take your arm if they need assistance.



Belinda Richardson, part of 'Sky High' 2005. Prints, watercolour on paper.

- > Avoid revolving doors. On stairs or on escalators, assist the person by putting his or her hand on the railing. It is important that the person is made aware of the fact that the stairs/escalators are going up or down. Always give the person a choice when using stairs, escalators or a lift.
- > When seating people with a vision impairment put their hand on the back of the chair and they will then be able to seat themselves.
- > Don't leave people who have a vision impairment in an open area or leave without saying that you are doing so. When you leave, lead the person to a landmark, eg. reception desk, they will then feel more secure and oriented to the surrounding environment.
- > Always tell the person with a vision impairment if you have moved objects or furniture.
- > Do not pat a guide dog when in harness because you may distract the dog from working.
- > Use words such as "look" and "see"; they are part of every one's vocabulary. Otherwise both you and the person who with a vision impairment will feel awkward.
- > Close or open doors fully rather than leaving them ajar.
- > Ask people with a vision impairment what they need and want.
- > **SPEAK DIRECTLY TO THE PERSON RATHER THAN DIRECTING QUESTIONS THROUGH THEIR COMPANION.**

people who have a hearing impairment

- > To get a person's attention, place yourself where the person can see you.
- > Make sure the person is looking at you when you speak to them.
- > Be aware of room or window lighting and position yourself to ensure maximum light on your face.
- > Look directly at the person and speak clearly, especially if the person wishes to lip-read. Do not exaggerate lip movements or put your hand over your mouth while speaking. Be aware facial hair can sometimes make it difficult for people to lip-read.
- > Be flexible. If the person doesn't understand something you say, reword it instead of repeating it. Use notes or visual expressions/ clues to illustrate what you are saying.
- > You can use a pad and pencil to communicate if it becomes necessary.
- > Reduce unnecessary background noise – this can interfere with hearing aids and make communication difficult.
- > Ask if the person is able to hear you. It may not be necessary or appropriate to shout.
- > Ask short clear questions that require only short answers.
- > Don't refer to a person who is deaf or has a hearing impairment as "deaf/dumb". Some people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment can speak; others are "nonverbal" and use sign language.
- > Relax and don't be embarrassed if you use terms like "Did you hear about..."
- > Make sure the person has understood you. If necessary write it down.
- > If there is a sign language interpreter present, face the person with the hearing impairment when talking, not the interpreter.
- > Position a signing interpreter so that he or she is near you and visible.

people who have a speech impairment

The following are some tips for talking with people with speech that is difficult to understand.

Some people may have difficulty understanding speech as well, but many do not, don't assume.

- > Don't raise your voice, they are not deaf.
- > Talk in a quiet environment if possible.
- > Be patient and don't take over the conversation because you are afraid you won't understand the person speaking.
- > Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat themselves, they know their speech is hard to understand.
- > Ask the person to say it using different words if you can't understand.
- > Ask if they can give you a clue to the subject or spell a word. (They may have a communication aid)
- > If the person is using an electronic communication aid stand in front of the person and refrain from reading over their shoulder as they type.
- > Don't pretend you have understood if you haven't.
- > Ask if there is someone close by who may be able to interpret for you.
- > Acknowledge if you have not been successful despite all efforts and ask whether the message was urgent.
- > Never presume that a person who is non-verbal does not understand what you are saying, they may require the assistance of a communication aid eg: picture communication board, talking device.

people who have a physical impairment

- > If a person is using a wheelchair, where possible, be seated so the person doesn't have to look up. Communicate at eye level with the person.
- > Speak directly to the person and not with someone who maybe assisting them.
- > DON'T SHOUT. Deafness and physical disability are not related.
- > Never patronise people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- > Ensure that there is a clear pathway to intended destinations and at meetings or restaurants, make a chair-free space at the table for the person using the wheelchair to sit.
- > Push the person in the wheelchair only when asked. Don't take control without asking.
- > When assisting in going up or down a curb, ask the person if they prefer going backwards or forwards.
- > Be prepared – learn the locations of ramps and accessible facilities.
- > Never hang onto or lean on a person's wheelchair or tray – the chair is part of one's personal body space and "hanging" on it can be very annoying and offensive.



people who have a cognitive impairment

A cognitive impairment is a disability which affects a person's ability to process information. It may be due to an intellectual disability which a person was born with (such as Down syndrome) or it may be due to an injury to the brain later in life (such as an accident or stroke). People with cognitive impairments vary greatly in their abilities, so always respond to the individual's needs rather than making assumptions about their ability.

- > Speak directly to the person with the disability, not to a person who is assisting him or her.
- > BE PATIENT.
- > Make instructions clear and brief, but don't be condescending – all people deserve your respect. Don't get frustrated if you have to repeat yourself.
- > Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat something if you don't understand.
- > Pay attention, particularly if the person has a speech impairment Don't complete sentences for him or her.
- > Sometimes it can be helpful to write information down or to use pictures for people who have difficulty with memory. Ask if they'd like you to write the information down, for example directions or appointment times.



Michael Delaney

mental health

One in five adults will experience a mental health issue at some stage in their life. Mental health issues, at different times, can cause changes to a person's thinking, perception, feeling and emotional state. These changes can lead to behaviours that are out of context and do not match the situation as you would expect. People living with mental health issues usually manage these symptoms with medication and support.

Social interaction can often be difficult for a person experiencing an episode of mental illness. Be non-judgmental and allow time for interaction and decision making.

If a person speaks slowly or appears unfocussed it is usually due to the impact of compromised mental health, ie such as medication side effects or sleep disturbance.

If you are interacting with a person and you notice that the individual:

- > Is disoriented and responding to events and perceptions that you do not share, this indicates that the person may have lost touch with reality;
- > Is becoming highly anxious and frightened to the extent that the belief of threat is governing their behaviour, this indicates paranoia;
- > Is displaying unusual or inappropriate behaviour or emotion.

Be calm.

- > Read the body language to assess the situation. Non-verbal communication can be very helpful in times of confusion. Allow the person their space and initially avoid both direct eye contact and touching.
- > Show understanding and compassion. Empathise with their feelings without necessarily agreeing with what is being said eg: "I understand that you are feeling frightened by your experiences..."
- > Ask how you can help. The person may ask you to sit with them, they may be carrying an emergency contact number (GP, family) that you could ring, or they may want to be left alone. Respect the person's situation and do not pressure your assistance onto them.
- > Don't take things personally. Remember that the individual may not have insight into their behaviour and its impact on other people.
- > Use short, clear direct sentences to minimise confusion and keep your voice tone low and unhurried.
- > Do talk to the individual again. Symptoms of a serious mental health issue are episodic and successfully managed with medication and support. See the person not the symptoms of the illness.

supporting employees with disabilities

- > Help the employee understand and learn about the organisation – just like you would any new employee.
- > Describe the formal and informal requirements of the job. Introduce the person to co-workers. Encourage others to include the person, but don't try to force relationships on anyone.
- > Be sensitive to the person's limitations, but don't lower traditional performance standards.
- > Consider changing your supervisory style.
- > Provide the same encouragement and feedback as you would to other employees, and don't be afraid to offer constructive feedback. The person may offer alternative strategies for dealing with difficulties.
- > Use language that the person can understand.
- > Encourage the person to pursue career development and training opportunities, just as you would with other employees.
- > Arrange relevant training for staff to be more aware of disability issues and how to best accommodate a person's needs.



further information

Disability Advisory Committees

Hobsons Bay – 9932 1118

Maribyrnong – 9688 0315

Wyndham Disability Advisory Group (WYNDAG) – 9749 3088

MetroAccess Project Officers

Hobsons Bay – 9932 1168

Maribyrnong – 9688 0313

Wyndham – 9742 8138

Western Region Disability Network 9687 7066

or www.disabilityconnections.org.au

Western Region Client Network 9416 4003

Independent Living Centre (Yooralla) Brooklyn 9362 6111

Artlife program, Footscray Community Arts Centre, 9362 8804

www.footscrayarts.com

We welcome your comments. If you have any comment or suggestion regarding this publication please contact any of the MetroAccess Project Officers listed above.

The participating Councils and Organisations of this booklet are committed to protecting and enhancing our environment. This publication is printed on recycled, non-chemically bleached stock using vegetable inks.

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This booklet provides some helpful information about communicating with people with disabilities and their families. Approximately 1 in 5 people in our community have a disability. Your local Council provides services for people with disabilities.

يقدم هذا الكتيب بعض المعلومات المفيدة حول التواصل مع الأشخاص المصابين بإعاقات. تقريباً هناك شخص من بين كل خمسة أشخاص في مجتمعنا يعاني من إعاقة. إن بلديتكم المحلية تؤمّن خدمات للأشخاص المصابين بإعاقات ولعائلاتهم.

本手冊提供了一些與殘疾人溝通方面的有用信息。在我們的社區中，每五人中就有一人患有殘疾。地方市政府為殘疾人及其家人提供各種服務。

Αυτό το φυλλάδιο παρέχει μερικές κατατοπιστικές πληροφορίες σχετικά με την επικοινωνία με άτομα με αναπηρία. Περίπου 1 στα 5 άτομα στην κοινωνία μας έχουν μια αναπηρία. Ο τοπικός σας Δήμος παρέχει υπηρεσίες για άτομα με αναπηρίες και τις οικογένειές τους.

Questo opuscolo fornisce alcune informazioni utili per poter comunicare con persone che hanno una disabilità. Nella nostra comunità 1 persona su 5 circa ha una disabilità. Il Comune locale fornisce servizi per le persone con disabilità e per le loro rispettive famiglie.

Tập sách này cung cấp một số thông tin hữu ích về việc truyền đạt với bị người khuyết tật. Khoảng chừng 1 trong 5 người trong cộng đồng chúng ta bị khuyết tật. Hội Đồng Thành Phố địa phương của quý vị cung cấp dịch vụ cho người bị khuyết tật và gia đình của họ.



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