

TEN COMMANDMENTS OF ETIQUETTE FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

It sometimes feels uncomfortable meeting someone for the first time. When you are meeting a person with a disability, there is only one thing to keep in mind: You are meeting a person, who just so happens to have a disability. There is no complex method that you must use to communicate or interact. "Hello" usually works just fine. A respectful strategy is to approach people with disabilities as you would approach anyone of their age or in their position: "Mr./Mrs." if they are older than you, and simply by name or nickname if they are your peer. You can also ask what they would like to be called! Here are some tips for easing the discomfort in certain situations:

1. When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.
2. When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
3. When meeting a person who has a visual disability, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning on or hanging on to a person and is considered rude. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
7. Listen attentively when you are talking to a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.
8. When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation. Find a chair to sit in or lean on one knee so you are face-to-face.

9. Not all people who are Deaf can read lips. For those who do lip-read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Do not be afraid to ask questions when you are unsure of what to do. Remember, if you are unsure of what to say or do, just politely ask! People are willing to help you if you treat them with respect.

Some additional tips:

- Offer an alternate way of communicating if you really cannot understand what someone is saying; you could try signing, writing things down, or acting out your message.
- Some people use communication boards to communicate. Make sure these are always available for them to use.
- When working with individuals who are blind or have visual disabilities and require guiding assistance, be sure to warn them of upcoming steps, curbs, furniture, doors, or other changes in the terrain. If they ask for assistance with guiding, ask them how you can assist—they may have a preferred method, like linking arms or holding hands.
- Let people who are Deaf or who have hearing disabilities take the lead in how they wish to communicate. Everyone is different, and they may have a unique way of communicating that you can learn.
- Speaking more loudly will not necessarily make you more easily understood when speaking to someone who is Deaf or has a hearing disability. Shouting at someone is interpreted as patronizing and offensive. Instead, try finding a nonverbal way to communicate.
- If your camper has a service animal, remember that the animal is “on the job” when with your camper so do not try to pet or play with the animal. Ask your camper if and when it would be appropriate to pet the service animal.
- Just as saying “see you later” and “did you hear about that”? are not considered offensive, neither are questions such as “Did you watch that movie”? (as opposed to “Did you hear that movie”? when speaking to someone who is blind or has a visual disability) and “Do you want to go for a walk”? (as opposed to “Let’s go for a roll!” when speaking to someone who uses a wheelchair.

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