

Disability Etiquette Guide



Disability etiquette is a set of guidelines dealing specifically with how to approach disabled people. The rules of etiquette and good manners for interacting with disabled people are generally the same as the rules for good etiquette in society.

The following rules focus on specific issues which frequently arise for disabled people with different kinds of impairments. Practical tips are provided to assist you in your relationship with a disabled person.

The language about disability

There are many words and terms that are used to identify disability. The way these are understood differs, for some of us, the term, “disabled people”, is a source of pride, identity and recognition that disabling barriers exist within society and not within us as individuals. For others, the term, “people with disability”, has the same meaning and is important to those who want to be recognised as a person before their disability.

The current consensus, based on advice from the New Zealand Disability Strategy Revision Reference Group, is “disabled people”.

In future, it is possible the disability community will decide to revise the way to describe themselves. If this happens, the language can be changed to reflect this. Not all members of the disability community identify with disability-focused language:

- Older people and their families and whānau sometimes think that disability is a normal part of the ageing process.

- People with invisible impairments such as mental health issues can sometimes identify as part of the mental health community, and not the disability community.

- Deaf people who identify as part of the Deaf community understand themselves as having their own unique language and culture, and do not always identify as being disabled. (A capital D rather than a lower case d in “Deaf” is used to convey this.)

- Most Māori disabled people identify as Māori first. The importance of their cultural identity, which encompasses language, whānau, cultural principles, practices and linkages to the land through genealogy, is paramount to how they live their day to day lives in both Te Ao Māori and Te Ao Pakeha.

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We know non-disabled people are sometimes not sure which words or terms to use in order to be respectful. It is advisable to listen to how disabled people refer to themselves and use the same language. If you are still not sure, then just ask what language disabled people prefer

The basics

The basic principle is to put the person before the impairment.

Ask before you help

Just because someone has an impairment, don't assume they need help. Disabled adults want to be treated as independent people.

Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it.

If they do want help, just ask how, before you act.

Remember to be sensitive about physical contact.

Think before you speak

Always speak directly to the disabled person, not to their companion, aide or sign language interpreter.

Respect their privacy.

If you ask about their disability, they may feel like you are treating them as a disability and not as a person.

Don't make assumptions

Disabled people are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make presumptions about people's perceived limitations.

Never ask "What happened to you?"

Respond graciously to requests.

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People who are mobility impaired

People who are mobility impaired include people with varying types of physical impairments. People with mobility impairments often use assistive devices or mobility aids such as wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, canes and artificial limbs to aid in mobility.

Wheelchair users are people, not equipment.

Never patronise wheelchair users by patting them on the head or shoulder.

When speaking to a person using a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.

Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair; it's part of their personal space. If you help someone down a curb without waiting for instructions, you may dump them out of their chair. You may detach the chair's parts if you lift it by the handles or the footrest.

Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked. Displays should not be in front of entrances; rubbish bins should not be in the middle of aisles and boxes should not be stored on ramps.

Be aware of wheelchair users' reach limits. Place as many items as possible within their grasp. And make sure there is a clear path of travel to shelves and display racks. When talking to a wheelchair user, grab your own chair and sit at their level. If that's not possible, stand at a slight distance, so they aren't straining their neck to make eye contact with you.

If the service counter at your place of business is too high for a wheelchair user to see over, step around it to provide service. Have a clipboard handy if filling in forms or providing signatures is expected.

If your building has different routes through it, be sure your signs direct wheelchair users to the most accessible ways around the facility. People who walk with a cane or crutches also need to know the easiest way to get around a place, but stairs may be easier for them than a ramp. Ensure security guards and receptionists can answer questions about the most accessible way around the building and grounds.

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If the nearest public toilet is not accessible or is located on an inaccessible floor, allow the person in a wheelchair to use a private or employees' accessible toilet.

People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so never grab them. People who are mobility-impaired may lean on a door for support as they open it. Pushing the door open from behind or unexpectedly opening the door may cause them to fall. Even pulling out or pushing in a chair may present a problem. Always ask before offering help.

If you offer a seat to a person who is mobility-impaired, keep in mind that chairs with arms or with higher seats are easier for some people to use.

Falls may be a problem for people with mobility impairments. Be sure to set out adequate warning signs if the floor is wet. Also, put out mats on rainy or snowy days to keep the floors as dry as possible.

People who are not visibly mobility-impaired may have needs related to their mobility. For example, a person with a respiratory or heart condition may have trouble walking long distances or walking quickly. Be sure work areas and workstations have ample seating for people to sit and rest.

Some people have limited use of their hands, wrists or arms. Be prepared to offer assistance with reaching for, grasping or lifting objects, opening doors etc.

People who are visually impaired or blind

People who are blind know how to orient themselves and get around on the street. They are competent to travel unassisted, though they may use a cane or a guide dog. A person may have a visual impairment that is not obvious. Be prepared to offer assistance - for example in reading - when asked.

Identify yourself before you make physical contact with a person who is blind. Tell them your name - and your role if it's appropriate, such as security guard, case manager, receptionist, employment coordinator, work broker. And be sure to introduce them to others who are in the group, so they are not excluded.

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It is helpful to call them by name or touch them gently on the arm, when addressing a person who is blind.

If a new employee is blind or visually impaired, offer them a tour of your workplace.

People who are blind need their arms for balance, so offer your arm - don't take theirs - if they need to be guided. However, it is appropriate to guide a blind person's hand to a banister or the back of a chair to help direct them to a stairway or a seat.

If the person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the dog. As you are walking, describe the setting, noting any obstacles, such as stairs ("up" or "down") or a big crack in the footpath. Other hazards include: half-opened doors, desks or plants. If you are going to give a warning, be specific, "Look out!" does not tell the person if they should stop, run, duck or jump.

If you are giving directions, give specific, non-visual information. Rather than say, "Go to your right when you reach the office supplies," which assumes the person knows where the office supplies are, say, "Walk forward to the end of this aisle and make a full right."

If you need to leave a person who is blind, inform them first and let them know where the exit is, then leave them near a wall, table, or some other landmark. The middle of a room will seem like the middle of nowhere to them.

Don't touch the person's cane or guide dog. The dog is working and needs to concentrate. The cane is part of the individual's personal space. If the person puts the cane down, don't move it. Let them know if it's in the way.

Offer to read written information - such as the forms to customers who are blind.

A person who is visually impaired may need written material in large print. A clear font with appropriate spacing is just as important as type size. Labels and signs should be lettered in contrasting colours. It is easiest for people with vision impairments to read bold white letters on a black background.

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Good lighting is important, but it shouldn't be too bright. In fact, very shiny paper or walls can produce a glare that disturbs people's eyes.

Keep walkways clear of obstructions. If people who are blind or visually impaired are regular clients, inform them about any physical changes, such as rearranged furniture, equipment or other items that have been moved.

Don't worry about using words such as "see" or "look" in a conversation. These words are a part of everyday conversation and are not considered offensive.

People who are hard of hearing or Deaf

The term, "hard of hearing", is often used to describe people with any degree of hearing loss, from mild to profound, including those who are deaf and those who are hard of hearing.

As already stated, Deaf people who identify as part of the Deaf community understand themselves as having their own unique language and culture, and do not always identify as disabled. All people who use New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) identify themselves as being Deaf.

NZSL is an entirely different language from English, with its own syntax. Speech reading (lip reading) is difficult for people who are deaf if their first language is sign language, because the majority of sounds in English are formed inside the mouth, and it's hard to speech read a second language.

People who are hard of hearing, however, communicate in English. They use some hearing but may rely on amplification and/or seeing the speaker's lips to communicate effectively.

To facilitate lip reading, face into the light and keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth. Don't turn your back or walk about while talking. If you look or move away, the person might assume that the conversation is over.

There is a range of communication preferences and styles among people with hearing loss that cannot be explained in this brief space. It is helpful to note that the majority of late deafened adults do not communicate with sign language and use English. They may be candidates for writing and assistive listening devices to help improve communication.

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People with cochlear implants, like other people with hearing impairments, will usually inform you what works best for them.

When the exchange of information is complex, the most effective way to communicate with a native signer is through a qualified sign language interpreter. For a simple interaction writing back and forth is usually okay.

Follow the person's cues to find out if they prefer sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking. If you have trouble understanding the speech of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, let them know.

When using a sign language interpreter, look directly at the person who is deaf, and maintain eye contact to be polite. Talk directly to the person ("What would you like?"), rather than to the interpreter ("Ask them what they'd like.").

People who are deaf need to be included in the decision-making process on issues that affect them; don't decide for them.

Before speaking to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, make sure you get their attention. Depending on the situation, you can extend your arm and wave your hand, tap their shoulder.

Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences the person doesn't understand.

Speak clearly. Most people who are hard of hearing count on watching people's lips as they speak to help them understand. Avoid obscuring your mouth with your hand while speaking.

There is no need to shout at a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. If the person uses a hearing aid, it will be calibrated to normal voice levels; your shout will just sound distorted.

People who are deaf (and some who are hard of hearing or have speech impairments) make and receive telephone calls with the assistance of a device called a TTY (short for teletypewriter). A TTY is a small device with a keyboard, a paper printer or a visual display screen and acoustic couplers (for the telephone receiver).

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People with speech impairments

A person, who has had a stroke, is severely hard of hearing, uses voice prosthesis or has a stammer or other type of speech impairment may be difficult to understand.

Give the person your full, unhurried attention and speak in your regular tone of voice. Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences. If you have trouble understanding, don't nod. Just ask them to repeat. In most cases the person won't mind and will appreciate your effort to hear what they have to say.

If you are not sure whether you have understood, you can repeat for verification.

If, after trying, you still cannot understand the person, ask them to write it down or to suggest another way of facilitating communication.

Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.

A quiet environment makes communication easier.

People with cognitive impairments (learning disability)

People with cognitive impairments have difficulty remembering, learning new things, concentrating or making decisions that affect their everyday life. Cognitive impairments range from mild to severe.

Use language that is concrete rather than abstract. Be specific, without being simplistic.

Repeat information, using different wording. Allow time for the information to be fully understood.

People may respond slowly in conversation. Be patient, flexible and supportive.

Some people with cognitive impairments may be easily distracted. Try to redirect politely.

People with brain injuries may have short-term memory difficulties and may repeat themselves or require information to be repeated.

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People with auditory perceptual difficulties may need to have directions repeated, and may take notes to help them remember directions or the sequence of a task.

People who experience “sensory overload” may become disorientated or confused if there is too much to absorb at once. Provide information gradually and clearly. Reduce background noise, if possible.

People with autism spectrum disorder

Autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a range of conditions characterised by challenges with social skills, behaviour, verbal and nonverbal communication. The word, “spectrum”, refers to a wide range of differences people with ASD can have. Signs and symptoms vary with age and can also vary over time. ASD can be mild, moderate or severe.

Given that most people with autism experience difficulty processing everyday sensory information, it is helpful to minimise non-essential sensory input to create a safer sensory environment and facilitate communication:

– Loud noises should be avoided.

– Fluorescent and flashing lighting can cause severe sensory overload, so natural light or soft incandescent lighting is better.

Large groups can be over-stimulating or overwhelming; it can be challenging to understand the social nuances of such groups. Small groups in quiet rooms are the better option for meaningful communication.

People with ASD communicate in different ways, from spoken words to writing to gestures and sounds. It is important to respect these diverse forms of communication.

Do not insist on eye contact which can be distracting or even uncomfortable and threatening.

Bear in mind that the tone of voice, body language or facial expressions of a person with ASD may not match what they intend to communicate. Do not expect a person with ASD to read nonverbal communication. When necessary, be clear and direct.

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Make sure to allow for sufficient processing time when asking questions or engaging in a conversation.

People with ASD like routine and predictability. Let them know how long the current activity is expected to take and what will happen next.
