

Disability Etiquette: Considerations When Working with People with Disabilities

More than one in five Minnesota adults have some type of disability. Despite progress, adults with disabilities in Minnesota continue to face barriers that keep them from receiving equitable service and support.

Health equity is not possible without including considerations for people with disabilities or unique health needs. Recognizing inequalities and the lived experiences of people with disabilities is crucial to providing acceptable care and service.

Below are basic etiquette tips to use when interacting with people with disabilities. Making these practices part of basic behavior can help ensure people with disabilities are treated with respect. When in doubt about what to do, simply ask.

Communicate clearly

- Identify yourself when you speak.
- Speak directly to the person with the disability, not to their companions, support people, or interpreters. Bring yourself to their eye level by kneeling or pulling up a chair, whenever possible.
- If you are unable to understand someone when they speak, ask the person to repeat themselves. Then restate what they have said to make sure you understood the person clearly.

Allow personal space

- Never touch someone's wheelchair, walker, scooter, or other mobility device.
- Do not pet, feed, or distract service animals.

Be patient and respectful

People with disabilities may move, speak, think, or act at a different pace than you. They may have different abilities for picking up social cues or processing information and they could become overstimulated by noises, smells, or the people around them.

- Never assume someone needs help. If you want to help, ask first if help is needed or wanted.
- Do not speak for someone else unless asked to do so.
- Do not speak with a louder tone or at a slower pace unless someone has requested it.
- Do not judge or dismiss someone who reacts in an unexpected way. Stress or stimuli that you are not aware of may be affecting them.

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- Keep in mind that some people may have multiple disabilities and that disabilities are not always apparent.
- Recognize that certain language or phrases can be demeaning or victimizing and should not be used. See the table below.

Use people-first language

The words we use are powerful. People-first language avoids defining people by their disability and instead emphasizes the individuality, equality, and dignity of people with disabilities.

| Use these: | Instead of these: |
|--|--|
| Person with or who has a disability | Disabled or handicapped person |
| Person who uses a wheelchair | Wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair |
| Person with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability | Retarded; or intellectually, cognitively, or developmentally disabled person |
| Person who is successful, productive | Victim or hero language, like: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Has overcome his/her disability▪ Suffers from ..., or struggles with ... |

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