

Tip Sheet on Disability Etiquette

Use People (or Person) First Language

People with disabilities are first and foremost people. Using “People First” language should be the default mode of communication which puts the focus on the person, not their disability. For instance, a person who uses a wheelchair not a wheelchair-bound person.

Words to Lose	Words to Live By
The disabled, the blind	Person with a disability, people who are blind
Retard, special, slow	Intellectual Disability
Wheelchair-bound	Uses a wheelchair
Insane, crazy, psycho	Psychiatric disability
Handicap	Disability
Differently abled, handicapable	Avoid trendy or cute terms

Adapted from *Disable Disrespect* from the Indiana Governor’s Council for People with Disabilities

Other Resources

- **Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities**

<https://unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette/>

This 18-page booklet (free PDF download) from the United Spinal Association provides numerous tips and examples.

- **Identity-First Language** by Lydia X. Z. Brown <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>

This article explains why the author prefers to be considered an “Autistic Person” rather than a person with autism.

Basic Etiquette & Welcoming “Rules”

These are a few general tips about “disability etiquette.” These rules will help curtail stereotypes and make you check your assumptions before your interaction. Stereotyping language and beliefs lead to interactions with people who have disabilities that are not “welcoming” – they reinforce difference as something negative and create situations of exclusion and limited access.

- Ask before you help
- Speak directly with the person
- Treat adults as adults
- Respect privacy
- Let the person set the pace
- Be sensitive about physical contact
- Treat personal devices as personal
- Consider needs ahead of time

Common Myths and Stereotypes

- People with disabilities are brave and courageous.
- People with disabilities do not work or can only do basic unskilled jobs.
- People with disabilities don’t have families or sexual relationships.
- People who use a wheelchair are “confined” to their wheelchair.
- All people with disabilities are on or receive benefits such as SSI, Medicaid, etc.
- All persons with hearing disabilities can read lips.
- People with disabilities always need help.