

Disability etiquette: a winning strategy

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Do you ever wonder how to act around someone who has a disability? Do you worry you might say or do the wrong thing?

No one wants to hurt or embarrass anyone. Unless you know a person who has a disability, it's only natural that you may have concerns about the "right" things to say or do.

Here are some basic tips that may help you¹:

- 1. Use proper words and phrases.** Don't use demeaning terms like "cripple" or "retarded." Remember that a person has a disability – he or she is not the disability. So you'd want to say "John has epilepsy" rather than "John is epileptic."
- 2. Ask first.** People with disabilities are often independent. Ask before you assume someone needs your help.
- 3. Avoid judgments.** When you see people who use a cane, wheelchair or other device, don't presume they're ill or fragile. Chances are they're just like you in many ways.
- 4. Check out access.** If you're meeting someone who has a disability, pick a place that offers access. This means there are ramps, elevators and other ways for people with disabilities to get around safely and comfortably. Avoid taking friends with disabilities to places that don't offer access.

5. Respect personal space. If a person who has a disability needs your help, he or she will usually let you know. Never grab or touch people who are blind or have other disabilities without asking. You may surprise them or even get in their way.

6. Don't interfere. If someone is in a wheelchair or has a service dog, be respectful of boundaries. Don't pet the dog, lean on the wheelchair or interfere with the person's movement.

7. Speak to the person, not his or her aid. Sometimes an aid will accompany a person with a disability. If you want to ask or say something, remember to address the person, not his or her helper.

8. Don't rush. People with disabilities may need more time to walk, eat or do other things. Let them set the pace.

Remember: A disability is just one part of a person. Many people with disabilities are happy to be considered but don't want to be fussed over.

¹www.nationaldisabilitynavigator.org