

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

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One in five people lives with a disability – those are the stats. Sometimes people are uncomfortable around people with disabilities because they don't know how to act or what to say. Here are some general tips to make communicating easier:

First and most important – people with disabilities, like everyone else, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. People with disabilities have different personalities and different preferences about how to do things. To find out what a person prefers, ask.

When you meet someone with a disability, it is appropriate to shake hands – even if a person has limited hand use or artificial limbs. Simply touch hands (or the person's prosthesis) to acknowledge his/her presence. Shaking the left hand is also fine.

Always ask before you assist a person with a disability, and then listen carefully to any instructions. Do not interfere with a person's full control over his/her own assistive devices. For example, before you push someone who uses a wheelchair, make sure to ask if they want to be pushed. Likewise, never move crutches or communication boards out of the reach of their owners without permission.

Remember, most people with disabilities want to serve as well as be served and enjoy assisting others.

Usually people with disabilities do not want to make the origin or details of their disability the first topic of conversation. In general, it's best not to ask personal questions until you've become real friends.

Be considerate of the extra time it might take a person with a disability to get some things done.

Speak directly to the person with a disability rather than to a companion or sign language interpreter who may be along.

Relax. Don't be embarrassed to use common expressions such as "I've got to run now," "See you later," or "Have you heard about" even if the person doesn't run, see or hear well. People with disabilities use these phrases all the time.

Some terms that might have sounded acceptable in the past, such as "crippled", "deaf and dumb" and "wheelchair-bound" are no longer accepted by people with disabilities. Many have negative associations. Instead say "person with a disability", "Mary is deaf (or hard of hearing)", and "Denise uses a wheelchair". This type of language focuses on the person first, and their disability afterwards.

Avoid excessive praise when people with disabilities accomplish normal tasks. Living with a disability is an adjustment, one most people have to make at some point in their lives, and does not require exaggerated compliments.

Don't lean on a person's wheelchair – it's considered an extension of personal space.

When you talk to a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, try to sit down so that you will be at eye level with that person.

Don't pet a guide or companion dog while it's working.

Give unhurried attention to a person who has difficulty speaking. Don't pretend to understand when you don't – ask the person to repeat what they've said.

Speak calmly, slowly and directly to a person who is hard of hearing. Don't shout or speak in the person's ear. Your facial expressions, gestures, and body movements help in understanding. If you're not certain that you've been understood, write your message.

Greet a person who is visually impaired by telling the person your name and where you are. When you offer walking assistance, let the person take your arm. Tell him or her when you are approaching inclines or turning right or left.

Be aware that there are many people who have disabilities that are not apparent. Just because you cannot see a disability does not mean it doesn't exist.

Help make community events available to everyone. Hold them in accessible locations. This makes it easier for everyone!

Active Living: The Health, Fitness & Recreation Magazine for People With a Disability (St. Ann's, Ontario).

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