



Community Safety Conversations

People with disabilities are part of everyday life in our community. Some disabilities we may recognize, and others we may not. Each person is different and may need more, or less, or different accommodations.

People with disabilities need to be included in the decision-making process for issues that affect them. So, let's learn to interact with those in our community in ways that are meaningful and impactful.

It's important to understand each other so we can make sure that people with disabilities are treated equitably in our community and that they are able to access the things that make our community great.

Listen. If you would like to help someone with a disability, ask if he or she needs help and listen to any instructions that person gives. Be considerate of the extra time it might take a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking and talking.

People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make decisions for them about participating in any activity. Depending on the situation, it could be a violation of the ADA to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations. Don't limit the person by having low expectations or using discriminating labels, and avoid outdated terms like handicapped, crippled, or retarded.

Be aware that many people with disabilities dislike euphemistic terms like physically challenged or differently abled. With any disability, avoid negative, disempowering words like victim or sufferer.

Look at and speak directly to a person, not through a companion, caregiver, or interpreter. Making small talk with a person with a disability is great! Just talk to them as you would anyone else.

People who use wheelchairs are individuals, not equipment. Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair. It's part of her personal space. A wheelchair empowers rather than limits its user. Say "a person who uses a wheelchair" not "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-bound".

People who use wheelchairs have differing disabilities and abilities. Some can use their arms and hands. Some can get out of their wheelchairs and walk for short distances. When talking to a person using a wheelchair, grab your own chair and sit at eye level. Don't lean over a person who uses a wheelchair in order to shake a person's hand.

Some people with disabilities depend on their arms for balance. Grabbing them, even if your intention is to assist, could knock them off balance. People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves so never grab them. People who have limited mobility may lean on a door for support as they open it. Pushing a door from behind or unexpectedly opening the door may cause them to fall. Even pulling out or pushing in a chair may present a problem. So always ask before offering help.

Make sure items are within someone's reach.

Registries and identification for disabled people can provide helpful information. Participation in a registry or providing information is the individual's choice.

Learning disabilities are lifelong disorders that interfere with a person's ability to receive, express, or process information. You may not realize that a person has a disability because the person functions so well.

People with dyslexia or other reading disabilities have trouble reading written information so give them verbal information and allow them extra time when they are reading.

Don't be surprised if you tell someone very simple instructions and he requests that you write them down. Because spoken information may get scrambled as he listens, a person with a learning disability such as an auditory processing disorder, may prefer that the information be demonstrated or put in writing. So, ask the person how you can best relay information and be direct in your communication.

People with developmental disabilities may have a hard time using what they have learned and applying it from one situation to another. So, speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple words and concrete rather than abstract concepts. Help her understand a complex idea by breaking it down into smaller parts.

Don't use baby talk or talk down to people who have developmental disabilities. They may benefit from repetition. Gauge the pace, complexity, and vocabulary of your speech according to theirs.

People with developmental disabilities may be anxious to please you. So, make sure the questions that you may ask are phrased in a neutral way in order to elicit accurate information, not just what they think you want to hear.

It can be difficult for people with developmental disabilities to make quick decisions so please be patient and allow the person to take their time.

Please use respectful language including considering whether identity first (“autistic person”). Or person first language (“person with autism”) is used depending on the person’s preference. Respectful language also mean please not using language like high versus low functioning labels to describe people.

Don’t insist on eye contact, because eye contact can be very distracting or even uncomfortable and threatening to many autistic people.

Autistic people communicate in many different ways from oral language, to typing, to using gestures and sounds. Meaningful communication with autistic people must involve respecting their manner of communication.

Please bear in mind that an autistic person’s tone of voice, body language or facial expressions may not match what they intend to communicate. Many people with autism have difficulty reading nonverbal communication and gestures so please be clear and direct. Offering a text-based way to communicate such as written or using a communication device may be a good alternative for people who are uncomfortable or have difficulty with oral language. They might need more time to process what you said and for them to respond.

Some autistic people have difficulty understanding what they hear, especially when there is background noise. Some people are sensitive to smells, sounds or light so don’t wear perfume or scented toiletries.

Try to avoid loud noises.

It can be helpful to tell the autistic person what you will be doing before you do it. Sudden changes and transitions are difficult for many autistic people.

Because it is a hidden disability, chances are you will not even realize if a person has a mental health condition. Some people with mental health conditions may have trouble picking up on social cues and others may be overly sensitive to those cues. One person may have a very high activity level while somebody else may appear sluggish. So, please treat each person as an individual and recognize that stress can affect the person’s ability to function.

Try to keep the pressure of the situation to a minimum and ask what would make the person most comfortable. Respect the person’s needs to the maximum extent possible.

A person may have a visual disability 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 the person your name and your role. If you are giving directions, tell the person specific but non visual information.

If a person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the dog. People who are blind may need their arms for balance so offer your arm, but don’t take the person’s if the person needs to be guided.

If you need to leave a person who is blind, please inform them you are leaving and ask if they need anything before you leave.

Many people who are Deaf communicate using sign language and consider themselves to be members of a cultural or linguistic group. They refer themselves as Deaf with a capital “D”, and they may be offended by the term “hearing impaired”.

It’s safest to refer to people who have hearing loss but communicate with spoken language as “hard of hearing” and to people with profound hearing losses as “Deaf”.

Follow the person’s cues to see if she prefers sign language, gestures, writing, or speaking.

Lip reading is difficult for people who are Deaf if their first language is ASL because the majority of sounds in English are formed inside the mouth so it is hard to read lips as a second language.

When using a sign language interpreter, look directly at the person who is Deaf and maintain eye contact to be polite. Talk directly to that person, “what would you like” rather than to the interpreter, “what would she like”?

Before speaking to a person who is Deaf or has a loss of hearing, make sure that you get that person’s attention.

People who have a hearing loss often don’t use sign language. They may use some hearing and rely on amplification and/or seeing and reading the person’s lips. So when talking, face that person and speak clearly. There is no reason to shout. If a person uses a hearing aid, it will be calibrated to normal speech levels. Give the person your full attention. Don’t interrupt or finish the person’s sentences.

If you have trouble understanding the speech of a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing, let that person know. Don’t just nod along. You can ask him to repeat. If you are not sure if you have understood, you can repeat what you thought you heard for verification.

People with brain injury have had damage to the brain, usually as a result of an accident, stroke, or tumor. They might have a loss, or reduction or communication, memory, motor, or might have emotional regulation challenges.

If you are not sure if the person understands you, ask if the person would like you to write down what you are saying. The person may have trouble concentrating or organizing his or her thoughts. So, be patient and try to minimize distractions.

There are such things as invisible disabilities. A person may make a request or act in a way that seems strange to you and that behavior may be disability-related. For example, a person may ask to sit rather than stand in line. This person may be fatigued from a condition such as cancer or some other chronic illness, or may be feeling the effects of medication. Or, he may give what seems to be simple verbal directions to somebody, but the person may ask you to write the information down. This may be because the person is having some type of learning issue

because of their invisible or chronic condition that might make written communication easier for him.

Even though these disabilities are hidden, they are very real. Please ask the person if there is anything needed and respect that person's needs and requests whenever possible.

Here are messages directly from people with disabilities:

Treat me like everyone else.

Calmness is a must. Provide clear, brief instructions.

Listen

Don't expect an instant response.

Ask me if I have any health conditions or disabilities that I want to disclose. And then, how to interact with me.

Be patient, not judgmental. Assume I am competent.

Remember adults with disabilities want to be treated as adults.

Don't assume I am drunk. I have Cerebral palsy.

Direct questions to me directly.

I may shut down and communicate only with text messages.

"I cannot always communicate effectively when I'm experiencing symptoms. My symptoms do not mean I am impaired by alcohol or drugs."

"I will generally discuss the best way to assist me suited to my needs."

"Just because I may be upset, doesn't mean that I am a threat."

"Ask questions and listen. We may not be able to comply with all requests because of impairments of our bodies, hearing, vision, etc."

"Listen if we say we can't breathe. Let us sit, not lie down."

"Just because I may be upset, doesn't mean that I am a threat."

"Be careful with my wheelchair."

"Avoid loud noises and other sensory challenges."

Here are some messages from caregivers of people with disabilities.

“My child gets angry because he is scared.”

“It may seem like they are lying, when they are having difficulty communicating.”

“Don’t ignore what they have to say.”

“Meltdowns are not because they are brats.”

“Just because a person with intellectual disabilities says they are fine, or can’t communicate the details of an event, doesn’t mean that nothing has happened to them.”

Thank you so much for listening and learning.

Let’s live safely together.

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