



DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

HOW TO CONNECT WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

A lack of knowledge and understanding can sometimes lead to uneasiness when interacting with a person who has a disability. But there's no need to let fear and uncertainty stop you from getting to know people with disabilities! Use our Disability Etiquette Guide to become more equipped and empowered when connecting with people with disabilities in your community.



The Tennessee Disability Coalition is an alliance of organizations and individuals across Tennessee who work together to improve the lives of Tennesseans with disabilities.



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MEETING A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

People with disabilities are like everyone else. Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind when interacting with people with disabilities.

*Please note, this is not a comprehensive list; **when in doubt, just ask!***

A handshake is not a standard greeting for everyone. This is especially true since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. A smile along with a spoken greeting is always appropriate. If you're not sure how to interact with someone respectfully, or how they would like to be addressed, just ask!

Speak directly to the person with a disability, not to their interpreter or anyone else who may be with them.

It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon", "have you heard", or "I'd better be running along," even if the person you are communicating with isn't able to do those things.

Don't mention the person's disability, unless they talk about it or it is relevant to the conversation.

Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially to someone who may speak slowly or with great effort. We promise it's worth it!

Don't change the way you speak. There's no need to talk louder, slower, or differently than how you normally would when communicating with someone with a disability.

Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. If you didn't hear or understand what someone said, ask them to repeat or rephrase.

Treat adults as adults. Don't patronize, infantilize, or talk down to people with disabilities by using pet names like "honey" or "sweetheart." This is especially true for older adults and individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

People with disabilities are not here to be your inspiration. Don't portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman because they have "overcome" a disability. Doing so implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents, skills, and the ability to contribute in society.

Don't assume, doubt, or question someone's disability status. Disability doesn't look one certain way. Some disabilities are visible, others are invisible. Don't assume "how disabled" someone is by the way they look, act, talk, or what assistive devices they choose to use.

Don't assume someone needs help. Offer to help by politely asking the person what they need or how you can support them. Listen for instructions and respect their decision. As with everything else, no means no.

Don't pretend to understand someone's disability experience. While TV, movies, and celebrities have helped normalize disability, every person with a disability has a unique experience. In fact, even people with the same disability have unique needs and experiences. When you're connecting with someone who has a disability, follow their lead, listen, and don't act like you "get it."

Kids can be curious, and that's okay. Having open conversations about diversity and disability with your kids is a great way to help normalize interacting with people with disabilities in everyday life. People with disabilities understand that kids may have questions, and most of the time they are happy to engage in a conversation with them. These interactions can be a positive learning experience for kids. However, it's important to recognize that the person you meet is not obligated to educate you about their condition or hold a conversation about disability.

Relax! We all make mistakes. You don't have to be an expert on disability to engage in our community. Just a willingness to learn, grow and communicate. Oh, and a sense of humor never hurts!



INTERACTING WITH A PERSON WHO USES MOBILITY AIDS LIKE WALKERS, WHEELCHAIRS, ETC.

Personal space. Do not push, move, lean on, or hold onto a person's mobility aid unless the person asks you to. A person's mobility aid is part of their personal space. You wouldn't just go through someone's wallet or touch someone's purse. The same applies to an individual's mobility aid.

Don't make assumptions. Some people may use their mobility aids full-time, and others may only use them occasionally. Regardless of how someone uses their mobility aid(s), never question their disability or assume that they can't go somewhere. Mobility aids give individuals freedom, not restrictions.

Don't try to help without asking first. Be polite and friendly when offering help. Ask the person what they need or how you can support them. Listen for instructions and respect their decision.

Be mindful of space when having conversations. When you're talking with someone who uses a wheelchair, make sure both of you are able to see eye to eye. In some settings that might mean taking a step or two back so there is enough space to make comfortable eye contact. Other times it might mean finding a chair or a place to sit so that you can make eye contact. Avoid bending down or kneeling in front of someone's wheelchair without asking. Some people might not mind, but others may find this patronizing.

Try to make physical spaces as accessible as possible. Clear a path by rearranging furniture and other objects to accommodate mobility aids before the person arrives. If you're using tables, make sure to have dedicated spaces.

Directions. When giving directions to someone who uses a mobility aid, consider distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles (curbs, stairs, steep hills, etc.)



MEETING A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY THAT AFFECTS SPEECH

Speech is not indicative of a person's intelligence. There are plenty of people who are not able to speak but have meaningful conversations every day. Don't judge someone's ability just because they communicate differently than you. Likewise, don't assume an individual is less intelligent just because their vocabulary or pronunciation is different.

Pay attention, be patient, and wait for the person to complete a word or thought. Do not finish it for the person.

Don't change the way you speak. There's no need to talk louder, slower, or differently than how you normally would.

Ask the person to repeat what is said if you do not understand. Tell the person what you heard and see if it is close to what they are saying.

Be prepared for people to use assistive technology to enhance or augment speech. Don't be afraid to communicate with someone who uses an alphabet board or a computer to communicate.

COMMUNICATING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS D/deaf OR USES AN ASSISTED HEARING DEVICE



Let the person take the lead in establishing the communication mode, such as American Sign Language (ASL), writing notes, or lip-reading. If the person lip-reads, face them directly, speak clearly and at a moderate pace.

Don't change the way you speak. There's no need to talk louder, slower, or differently than how you normally would.

Talk directly to the person even when an interpreter is present.

Don't ask questions about someone's assistive device. The decision to use an assistive device is a personal choice, and it is not appropriate to ask someone about their decision or any reason behind it.

Words matter! The term "hearing impaired" is not appropriate to use when referring to a person who is D/deaf or hard of hearing.

There are distinct cultures within the D/deaf community. Everyone who is D/deaf does not identify or communicate the same way, which is part of what makes their community so colorful! If you are unsure about how to respectfully refer to someone who is D/deaf, just ask.

INTERACTING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT



Neurodiversity is a term used for all brain types and functions. No two brains are the same. There is no 'right' way of thinking, learning, or behaving. Differences are not considered negative. Someone who is neurodivergent may or may not have a range of disabilities like autism, dyslexia, ADHD, and more.

Use clear language, and ask straightforward questions. Miscommunications can happen for a variety of reasons. Neurodivergent individuals may need more time to process spoken information. They may also misinterpret facial expressions and body language by taking words and expressions literally. Being direct with your words is best.

Don't assume all neurodivergent people are the same. People have different needs and preferred forms of communication. It's okay to ask an individual how they prefer to communicate. Be open to alternative modes of communication.

Be mindful of possible sensitivities. Support needs can vary from moment to moment. In different settings, neurodivergent individuals may be overstimulated or understimulated by sights, sounds, scents, touch, and social interactions. If this happens, the person might leave the space, take a break, or need help from a supportive peer. Be respectful and ready to help them meet their needs in order to safely self-regulate.

Don't assume levels of social ability. Building a strong social network can be more difficult for neurodivergent folks because they may or may not enjoy personal relationships. At times, small talk can be seen as less interesting than conversations about hobbies, values, or special interests. Although growing relationships can be complex for neurodivergent people, social connections are still important.

Be open to neurodivergent behaviors, perspectives, and experiences. Neurodivergent interactions might include stimming, fidgeting, fleeting eye contact, and straightforward communication. Giving neurodivergent people the benefit of the doubt helps them thrive. Remember, everyone interacts with the world differently.

MEETING SOMEONE WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES



Use clear and concise language. Keep your sentences short. You may occasionally ask if they understand what you are saying as needed. Rephrase or repeat words and phrases if needed to gain a mutual understanding.

Allow the person time to respond, ask questions, and clarify anything that is said. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may need more time to process information and respond. Be patient, and supportive, and wait for a response.

Don't pretend to understand or try to guess what a person is trying to say. If you don't understand what someone said, ask the person to repeat or rephrase what was said.

Don't assume someone needs help. Offer to help by asking the person what they need or how you can support them, then respect their answer.

Treat adults as adults. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities aren't children, and they shouldn't be treated as such.



INTERACTING WITH SOMEONE WHO LIVES WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

Having a mental health diagnosis can be a disability. This is determined by an individual and how they choose to identify.

Words matter! How we talk about mental health matters. Avoid using words like crazy, insane, and bipolar to describe a person or behavior. Likewise, avoid using phrases like "I'm having a panic attack" or "I'm so OCD" casually.

Having a mental health diagnosis is nothing to be ashamed of. Don't blame or shame someone for a mental illness. Just as you wouldn't shame or blame someone for having a physical disability, the same goes for invisible disabilities. Likewise, there is no need to question or comment on someone's medical decisions.

People are more than their diagnosis. Having a mental health diagnosis does not necessarily mean a person cannot participate in life and work activities. An invitation can go a long way. Instead of assuming what someone may or may not be able to do, simply invite them! Let the individual decide if they want to join in.

The mental health community is very diverse. Some folks might be loud and proud about their diagnosis, while others may choose to be more reserved. The stigma around mental health is still very real, so let the person lead, don't ask intrusive questions, and avoid saying "you know how they feel" if you don't.

ENGAGING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS BLIND OR HAS A DISABILITY THAT AFFECTS VISION



Not everyone who has a disability that affects vision is Blind – Be mindful that people have different levels of vision. Don't assume that just because a person uses a cane, wears sunglasses inside, or has a service animal that they are completely Blind. Some people with vision disabilities may not be able to see certain colors, might have "blind spots" in their vision, or may have more difficulty seeing bright lights or in the dark.

Greetings – When meeting the person, identify yourself and introduce others who may be present "Hi, it's [name] speaking."

Departing – Don't leave the person without excusing yourself first.

Guiding – When asked to guide someone, never push or pull the person. Offer your arm and allow them to reach for you, then walk slightly ahead. Be specific when describing the location of objects and point out doors, stairs, and curbs as you approach them.

Be mindful of personal space – Assistive devices like canes and service animals are part of an individual's personal space.

Don't ask questions about someone's assistive device – Some people may use canes, peripheral vision, or service animals to help them navigate the world. The decision to use an assistive device(s) is a personal choice, and it is not appropriate to ask why they have chosen to use or not use a specific one.

Service animals – Don't pet or distract a service animal. The service animal is responsible for its owner's safety and is always working. Service animals are part of a person's personal space. They are not a pet.



SERVICE ANIMALS

Please note the term "service animal" is used in this section to cover all service animals that are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). We recognize the complexity of what service animals have been called and how they are defined--differently in different federal acts.

It takes all kinds – Service animals come in all shapes and sizes.

- In addition to what has been referred to as seeing eye dogs, guide dogs, and dog guides for people who are Blind or have a vision disability, a variety of dogs may detect seizures, enhance therapies for children with autism, provide a calming presence for adults, and assist with a wide range of daily activities. Tasks performed by a service animal must be directly related to the individual's disability.
- State and local governments and businesses must modify their policies to permit miniature horses that have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities where reasonable.

Emotional support animals, comfort animals, and therapy dogs are not considered service animals under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Additionally, other species of animals, whether wild or domestic, trained or untrained, are not considered service animals either.

Engaging with animals – A service animal is a physical extension of a person with a disability and is there to work. For the safety and well-being of the team, don't try to pet a service animal or get their attention without asking permission.

Businesses & Service Animals – Businesses and state and local governments must allow a service animal unless it is not housebroken or is out of control. If it is not obvious it is a service animal, the staff may ask 2 questions:

1. Is the service animal required because of a disability?
2. What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?

The ADA does not allow a public accommodation to ask for documentation or certification. When there is a legitimate reason to ask that a service animal be removed, staff must offer the person with the disability the opportunity to obtain goods or services without the animal's presence. Do not ask about the person's disability.

WAYS TO MAKE YOUR EVENTS AND MEETINGS MORE INCLUSIVE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



Events and meetings – Create an environment that is welcoming to everyone. Ask what accommodations a person with a disability or group might need and contact them for information on how to best meet their needs.

People communicate in different ways – Try to use different forms of outreach to connect with people about events (e.g. email, social media, texting, phone calls, USPS, and even face-to-face).

Alternate formats – Have a plan and know who to contact for American Sign Language (ASL) and alternate formats when they are requested (e.g. Braille, large print, captions, remote options via video call, webinars, recordings, etc.).

Accommodations – Making an accommodation may seem scary or intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. Accommodations can be things like providing a document in larger print and enabling captions on a zoom call.

Know your surroundings – Know where someone can find accessible restrooms, telephones, and water fountains in the building. That way if you're asked, you can readily answer the question.

People have different needs, and they know what they are – When you can, ask people what they need to participate. One way to find out what your attendees need before an event or meeting is to have a place where they can request accommodations on your registration and RSVP forms. It can be as simple as a blank form with the question: "Please describe any accommodations related to your disability that you will need in order to participate."



USING APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

While life for people with disabilities has vastly improved, some things are slow to change— things like attitudes, perceptions, and how we talk about people with disabilities. Using outdated language to describe people with disabilities can not only be offensive but also perpetuates old, untrue stereotypes. Below are some tips on appropriate language to use when talking to or referring to people with disabilities.

Please note that the disability community is ever-evolving, so it's important to understand that language and preferences may change over time to better define our unique experience and identities.

There is no diversity, equity, and inclusion without disability. Disability encompasses so much more than what you might think or can see. Cultivating diversity in your community means including people with disabilities.

Disability is NOT a bad word. Disability is part of our identity, and we are proud to be a part of the disability community.

Disability vs. handicap – While the word "handicap" is in laws, codes, and regulations, it is considered offensive. The preferred term is disability. Generally, it is only acceptable to use "handicap" when referring to these laws or accommodations such as "handicap parking," although "accessible parking" is preferred today.

Negative and sensational descriptions – Do not say "suffers from," "a victim of," "afflicted with," or "crippled." Never say "invalid." These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities.

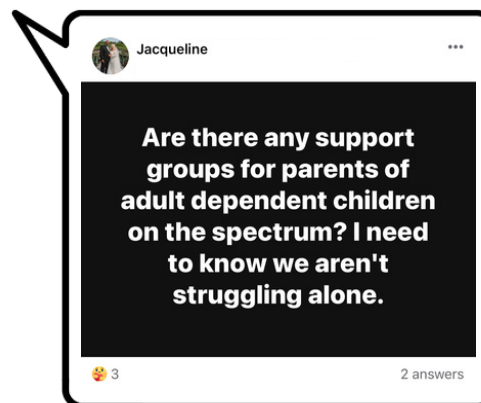
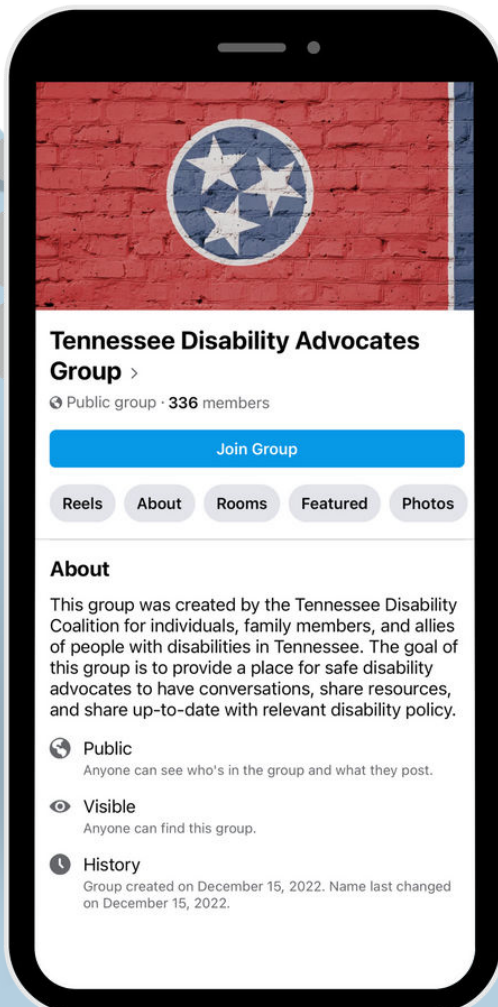
The R-Word – The R-word is never appropriate to use. It's disrespectful and perpetuates negative stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities.

People-first language – People-first language is usually a pretty safe bet; however, some people with disabilities prefer identity-first language instead.

- People-first language puts the person before the disability (i.e. "a person who has cerebral palsy").
- Identity-first language puts the disability before the person (i.e. "an autistic person").
- We recommend using people-first language when you don't know the preference of an individual or group.
- **NOTE:** Even if you may disagree, respect the language that a person with a disability chooses to use for themselves.

Wheelchairs and adaptive technology – Never say "wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair." People use mobility or adaptive equipment as tools of greater independence and freedom.

JOIN OUR STATEWIDE FACEBOOK GROUP FOR DISABILITY ADVOCATES IN TENNESSEE!





DISABILITY DAY ON THE HILL

HOSTED BY **TENNESSEE DISABILITY COALITION**

Disability Day on the Hill (DDH) is our chance to meet with state legislators, gather together as a community, and advocate for policies that make Tennessee a better place for ALL. DDH is our biggest event of the year, and we want you to join us!

THERE IS NO DEI WITHOUT DISABILITY. SHOWCASE YOUR BRAND'S COMMITMENT TO INCLUSION BY BECOMING A DDH SPONSOR.

SHAPE THE LAWS AND POLICIES THAT IMPACT OUR LIVES. MEET WITH LEGISLATORS AND PEERS AT OUR LARGEST EVENT OF THE YEAR.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DDH CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE AT WWW.TNDISABILITY.ORG

THE TENNESSEE DISABILITY COALITION

The Tennessee Disability Coalition is an alliance of organizations and individuals joined to promote the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

To support this mission, the Coalition offers the following programs:

- **Public Policy Program** advocates for good public policy for people with disabilities and their families.
- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Program** provides information, training, and technical assistance on the ADA. Additionally, the program provides information that goes beyond the basic minimal standards for compliance.
- **Family Voices of Tennessee** provides information, training, and assistance to families as they navigate service systems.
- **WorkAbleTN** helps individuals with disabilities explore employment options.
- **Brain Links** enriches the lives of Tennesseans with traumatic brain injury by training and empowering the professionals serving them.
- **Discretionary Small Grants Program** awards funds to projects and non-profit organizations in order to build capacity in the disability community.

We rely on grassroots support from individuals and families across the state. In addition to their contributions, we have a formal membership of 40+ organizations.

Organizational Membership – If your organization would like to join the Coalition, then please contact us at 615-383-9442 or coalition@tndisability.org



TENNESSEE DISABILITY
COALITION



www.tndisability.org