

Disability Etiquette



Mobility Impairment – ambulant and wheelchair

Keep in mind that a wheelchair is a positive source of freedom for those who have a mobility problem. The chair is part of a person's personal space, if you would not lean on someone's shoulder, don't lean on the wheelchair.

For short conversations, it is fine to stand and talk to someone in a wheelchair, stand back slightly so that they don't have to look up too much to speak to you. It can be condescending to crouch down, but for longer conversations, try to lead to a seating area where you can sit and be at eye level.

Wheelchair users can generally get along themselves, however they may ask for help to overcome obstacles. Do offer assistance, but wait until it has been accepted, don't try to push someone's chair for them.

If they have a companion or assistant with them, make eye contact and talk directly to them, rather than through the companion. Talk to adults appropriately, do not patronise.

Remember that wheelchair and mobility scooter users can have a variety of conditions, do not be surprised if they move their legs, stand up or even walk a few steps. Offer assistance to move around obstacles such as chairs, bags etc. Do not move the chair/scooter from a 'parked' position without asking first.



Visual Impairment

There are varying degrees of visual impairment, some people have a restricted range of vision, (eg. tunnel vision); some may be able to see objects close to, but not at any distance. Most people have some sight, even if blurred, very few have none at all.

Generally it is best to introduce yourself clearly, also those standing next to you. Offer

assistance, for example, to guide someone to a seat, but do not assume that they will need your help. When guiding someone, it is acceptable to offer your arm, or perhaps touch their elbow to guide. Explain clearly your directions, eg 'a step down here'. When offering a seat, place your hand on the back of the seat and tell the person that you have done this, if they wish, guide their hand to the back of the seat.

In conversation, refer to the person by name to help involve them. Do not move away and leave someone on their own, explain when you have to leave.

In a room they have not visited before, explain the layout, where doors are, windows, where the chairs are. It is best to have doors either fully open or closed.



Hearing Impairment

People with hearing problems depend on their sight for information. Some will use sign language, some will lip read. Others use hearing aids and/or radio microphones. It should be noted that hearing aids are very useful, but do tend to amplify sounds equally, making background noise a problem. Try to minimise this where possible.

If there is a sign language interpreter working with a Deaf person, you should face and speak to the Deaf person themselves.

Always ensure that you look directly at a person with a hearing impairment when speaking to them. Do not cover your mouth, speak clearly but normally. Lip reading can be tiring, involving concentration, so be considerate. Do not raise your voice; this will not help compensate for not being able to hear certain frequencies.

Speech Difficulties

It is very important to remember that difficulty with speech is not an indicator of intellectual ability.

Be patient and considerate, concentrate and allow the person time to say what they wish to say. Do not try to complete their sentences for them. If you do not understand something, try suggesting what you think they have said in clear language and allow them to assent or correct you. It can feel embarrassing listening to someone struggling to speak, just keep calm, watch the person and concentrate on them, do not be distracted.