



# Communicating with People with Disabilities

# 2005

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## Contributors

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# Communicating with People with a Disability

It is not uncommon for some of us to be uncomfortable around people with disabilities. We may be unsure of what to do, how to act, what is correct, and what will offend. The most effective strategy is to be sensitive, flexible and honest. A lack of sensitivity or flexibility can make the situation awkward, and may cause unintentional discrimination. Acknowledging feelings of awkwardness assists us to learn. Talking about disability is often difficult, partly because the appropriate terminology is unclear and often laden with negative connotations.

The most appropriate terminology, “person with a disability,” puts the emphasis on the person, not the limitation or disability. Treat people as people. Address people who have disabilities by their first names, only when extending the same familiarity to others.

Above all, be respectful, polite, and considerate, offer assistance, communicate effectively and don't hesitate to ask questions. Treat all people in the same way you would wish to be treated yourself.



# Terminology and Communication Tips

## Say

Person with a disability

Person with cerebral palsy or vision impairment etc

Person with a physical disability

Person who uses a wheelchair

Person with a hearing impairment, hearing loss, person who is deaf

Accessible parking, accessible toilets, etc.

## Avoid Saying

Victim, suffers from, deformed

Afflicted by / with or blind / can't see

Crippled, the crippled, crippling, invalid

Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair

Deaf and dumb, deaf mute,

Disabled toilets, handicapped Parking, etc.

## Do

Look at the person when addressing him or her

Ask the person about the best way to communicate if you are unsure

Speak directly to a person with a disability, even if a person without a disability accompanies him or her

If you know the person's name, address the person by their name

Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but don't assume a person with a disability needs or will accept it. Wait for acceptance and instruction before proceeding. Respect peoples wishes.

Extend your hand to shake when meeting someone

# People who have a Hearing Impairment

- To get a person's attention, place yourself where the person can see you.
- Make sure the person is looking at you when you speak to them.
- Be aware of room or window lighting and position yourself to ensure maximum light on your face.
- Look directly at the person and speak clearly, especially if the person wishes to lip-read. Do not exaggerate lip movements or put your hand over your mouth while speaking. Be aware facial hair can sometimes make it difficult for people to lip-read.
- Be flexible. If the person doesn't understand something you say, reword it instead of repeating it. Use notes or visual expressions/ clues to illustrate what you are saying.
- You can use a pad and pencil to communicate if it becomes necessary.
- Reduce unnecessary background noise – this can interfere with hearing aids and make communication difficult.
- Do not shout. It may not be necessary or appropriate. Ask if the person is able to hear you.
- Ask short clear questions that require only short answers if possible.
- Don't refer to a person who is deaf or has a hearing impairment as "deaf/dumb". Some people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment can speak; others are "nonverbal" and use sign language.
- Relax and don't be embarrassed if you use terms like "Did you hear about..."
- Make sure the person has understood you. If necessary write it down.

- If there is a sign language interpreter present, face the person with the hearing impairment when talking, not the interpreter.
- Position a signing interpreter so that he or she is near you and visible.

## **People who have a Speech Impairment**

The following are some tips for talking with people with speech that is difficult to understand.

- Some people may have difficulty understanding speech as well, but many do not, don't assume.
- Don't raise your voice, they are not deaf.
- Talk in a quiet environment if possible.
- Be patient and don't take over the conversation because you are afraid you won't understand the person speaking.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat themselves, they know their speech is hard to understand.
- Ask the person to say it using different words if you can't understand.
- Ask if they can give you a clue to the subject or spell a word. (They may have a communication aid)
- If a person is using an electronic communication aid stand in front of the person and refrain from reading over their shoulder as they type.
- Don't pretend you have understood if you haven't.
- Ask if there is someone close by who may be able to interpret for you.
- Acknowledge if you have not been successful despite all efforts and ask whether the message was urgent.

## People who have a Vision Impairment

- DON'T SHOUT. Vision problems and hearing loss are not necessarily related impairments.
- When meeting, identify yourself and others with you.
- When conversing in a group address people by name.
- If you know the person's name, address the person by their name so that they realise they are being spoken to.
- Offer assistance if it appears necessary but pay attention to the person's response – take your cues from him or her.
- Be specific with verbal directions to places, and avoid comments like, "Over there...." Direct the person who has a vision impairment to THEIR left or right, not yours.
- Do not presume that the person can't see anything. If appropriate it is OK to ask what they can see.
- When preparing printed information, for a person with low vision it is best to seek their advice for their preferred format for personal documents. General information for people with low vision should be provided in **Arial 18 point bold**.
- The lighting needs of people with vision loss differ and may be significant. Many people see much more with stronger light and others do not. The most common concern is glare.
- Walk alongside and slightly ahead of the person, don't hold onto the person's arm, and allow them to take your arm if they need assistance.
- Avoid revolving doors. On stairs or on escalators, assist the person by putting his or her hand on the railing. It is important that the person is made aware of the fact that the stairs/escalators are going up or down. Always give the person a choice when using stairs, escalators or a lift.

- When seating a person with a vision impairment put their hand on the back of their chair and they will then be able to seat themselves.
- Don't leave a person with a vision impairment in an open area or leave without saying that you are doing so. When you leave, lead the person to a landmark. Eg. reception desk, they will then feel more secure and oriented to the surrounding environment.
- Do not relocate objects or furniture without telling the person with a vision impairment.
- Do not pat a guide dog when in harness because you may distract the dog from working.
- Use words such as “look” and “see”; they are part of everyone’s vocabulary. Otherwise both you and the person with a vision impairment will feel awkward.
- Do not leave doors ajar. Close them or open them fully.
- Ask a person with a vision impairment what they need and want.
- **DO NOT DIRECT QUESTIONS THROUGH THEIR COMPANION.**



# People who have a Physical Disability

- If a person is using a wheelchair, where possible, be seated so the person doesn't have to look up. Communicate at eye level with the person.
- Speak directly to the person and not with someone who maybe assisting them.
- DON'T SHOUT. Deafness and physical disability are not related.
- Never patronise people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Ensure that there is a clear pathway to intended destinations and at meetings or restaurants, make a chair-free space at the table for the person using the wheelchair to sit.
- Push the person in the wheelchair only when asked. Don't take control without asking.
- When assisting in going up or down a kerb, ask the person if they prefer going backwards or forwards.
- Be prepared – learn the locations of ramps and accessible facilities.
- Never hang onto or lean on a person's wheelchair or tray – the chair is part of one's personal body space and "hanging" on it can be very annoying and offensive.
- Never presume that a person who is non-verbal does not understand what you are saying, they may require the assistance of a communication aid eg: picture communication board, talking device.

# People who have an Intellectual Disability

- Speak directly to the person with the disability, not to a person who is assisting him or her.
- BE PATIENT.
- Make instructions clear and brief, but don't be condescending – all people deserve your respect. Don't get frustrated if you have to repeat yourself.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat something if you don't understand.
- Pay attention, particularly if the person has a speech impairment. Don't complete sentences for him or her.

## Mental Health

*One in five adults will experience a mental health issue at some stage in their life. Mental health issues, at different times, can cause changes to a person's thinking, perception, feeling and emotional state. These changes can lead to behaviours that are out of context and do not match the situation as you would expect. People living with mental health issues usually manage the symptoms of compromised mental health with medication and support.*

- Social interaction can be difficult often for a people experiencing an episode of mental illness. Be non-judgmental and allow time for interaction and decision-making.
- If a person speaks slowly or appears unfocussed it is usually due to the impact of compromised mental health i.e. such as medication side effects or sleep disturbance.



## Mental Health (continued)

*If you are interacting with a person and you notice that the individual:*

- Is disorientated, and responding to events and perceptions that you do not share, this indicates that the person may have lost touch with reality.
- Is becoming highly anxious and frightened to the extent that the belief of threat is governing their behaviour, this indicates paranoia.
- Is displaying unusual or inappropriate behaviour or emotion.

### **Be calm.**

- Read the body language to assess the situation. Non-verbal communication can be very helpful in times of confusion. Allow the person their space and initially avoid both direct eye contact and touching.
- Show understanding and compassion. Empathise with their feelings without necessarily agreeing with what is being said eg: “I understand that you are feeling frightened by your experiences...”
- Ask how you can help. The person may ask you to sit with them, be carrying an emergency contact number [GP, Family] that you could ring, or may want to be left alone. Respect the person’s situation and do not pressure your assistance onto them.
- Don’t take things personally. Remember that the individual may not have insight into their behaviour and it’s impact on other people.
- Use short, clear direct sentences to minimize confusion and keep your voice tone low and unhurried.
- Do talk to the individual again. Symptoms of a serious mental health issue are episodic and successfully managed with medication and support. See the person, not the symptoms of the illness.

# Supporting Employees With Disabilities

- Help the employee understand and learn about the organisation – just like you would any new employee.
- Describe the formal and informal requirements of the job. Introduce the person to co-workers. Encourage others to include the person, but don't try to force relationships on anyone.
- Be sensitive to the person's limitations, but don't lower traditional performance standards.
- Consider changing your supervisory style.
- Provide the same encouragement and feedback as you would to other employees, and don't be afraid to offer constructive feedback. The person may offer alternative strategies for dealing with difficulties.
- Use language that the person can understand.
- Encourage the person to pursue career development and training opportunities, just as you would with other employees.
- Arrange relevant training for staff to be more aware of disability issues and how to best accommodate a person's needs.

## **Further Information**

### **Royal Victorian Institute of the Blind (RVIB)**

**1300 55 99 87**

[www.rvib.org.au](http://www.rvib.org.au)

### **Vision Australia Foundation**

**1300 365 560**

[www.visionaustralia.org.au](http://www.visionaustralia.org.au)

### **Vic Deaf**

**1300 780 225 Voice**

1300 780 235 TTY

[www.vicdeaf.com.au](http://www.vicdeaf.com.au)

### **SANE Australia (information & referral)**

**1800 688 382**

[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

### **Communication Resource Centre Scope**

**1800 888 824**

[www.scopevic.org.au](http://www.scopevic.org.au)

## **We welcome your comments**

If you have any comment or suggestion regarding this publication please contact the MetroAccess Community Development Officer 9298 4459

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