

Communicating Effectively with People with Disabilities

Communicating with a person who has a disability is not a difficult thing to do. Unfortunately, some people will avoid communicating with someone who has a disability, mainly because of uncertainty regarding how to best communicate with them. Here are some suggestions that might help you communicate with someone who has a disability.

General Considerations

- Remember that a person with a disability is a person just like anyone else. A person with a disability is entitled to the same dignity, rights, respect, and consideration that you would expect for yourself. If you are unsure how to interact with a person with a disability, try thinking about how you would expect to be treated if you were in the same situation.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability rather than through a companion, attendant, or sign language interpreter. Never say to a third party, "Tell him/her that..." Speaking face to face is one of the most personal means of communication that there is, and someone shouldn't be excluded from that direct contact just because they have a disability. Speaking to a third party rather than to the person with the disability sends a message to the person that you assume that he or she is not capable of understanding you (this is likely untrue), or that he or she is not worthy of your attention (this is clearly very rude and insulting).
- Always offer to shake hands when introduced to a person with a disability. Shaking hands is an important part of greeting or meeting someone for the first time. It's a way of showing respect and a way to relate to people socially. Offering the left hand is ok, shaking the hand of an artificial limb is ok, and offering to shake a hand that might have limited use is also ok.
- If you are offering assistance to a person with a disability, wait until the offer is accepted, then stop and listen or ask for instructions. People with disabilities want to remain as independent as possible, so do not simply jump in and begin trying to help (e.g., by pushing a wheelchair, by grabbing someone's arm). Always ask first if they want help and then how they want it. Don't be offended or feel embarrassed if your offer is declined, nor should you insist on trying to help if your offer is declined.
- Treat adults as adults, not children. Take the time to make things easier for a person with a disability in a respectful way, not in a patronizing way. Remember that just because someone has a disability, it doesn't mean they should be treated like a child. Never patronize a person with a disability by patting them on the head or shoulder. Be respectful; people with disabilities are just like everyone else and have their own individual strengths and needs.
- Relax! Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions that seem to relate to a person's disability. Some people think it is not polite to use words like, "see" or "look" to a blind person, or words like "listen" or "hear" to a deaf person. In fact, these words are only expressions, and are not related to the person's disability. Don't worry about making mistakes. If you are always worried about every word you say, you end up not communicating at all.
- Remember to use "people first" terminology. Say "person with a disability," rather than "disabled person." Avoid referring to people by the disability they have – a person is not a condition. Instead of saying "an epileptic" or "blind people" say "a person with epilepsy" or "people who are blind." Similarly, people are not "bound" or "confined" to wheelchairs. They use them to increase their mobility and enhance their freedom. It is more accurate to say "wheelchair user" or "person who uses a wheelchair." See the **Inclusive Language Booklet** for more information on this topic.

http://www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/diversity/diversity_resources/research_publications/2007_inclusive_language.pdf

Communicating Effectively with a Person with a Visual Disability

- Always identify yourself and any other people who are with you when meeting a person who is blind. If a new person arrives, introduce them. In a group setting, it is appropriate to gently touch the arm of the person when addressing them so that they know you are speaking to them. Don't walk away without letting the person know you are leaving.
- The most helpful thing you can do when talking or interacting with a blind person is to allow them to be as independent as they would like to be. If you have offered to lead the person and your offer is accepted, let the person hold onto your arm and control his or her own movements.
- When communicating with a person who is blind or visually impaired, face the person and speak directly to them. Use a normal tone of voice; don't shout.
- If you are giving directions to a person who is blind, be as specific as possible ("The door is straight ahead of you about 6 feet away"). Point out any potential obstacles in the path of travel using clock cues (e.g., "There is a chair at 2 o'clock").
- Alert a person who is blind or visually impaired to posted information or signage.
- If there is a guide dog or a working dog with someone, do not distract the animal by petting or talking to it without the person's permission. A person with a disability relies on the dog to assist them and distracting the animal may interfere with its ability to assist the person.

Communicating Effectively with a Person with a Physical Disability

- Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair or cart. Keep in mind that many people with a disability treat their chairs as an extension of their bodies. People's personal space includes their wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aid, so bumping into someone's chair is like bumping into the person. Also, do not move a person's cane, walker, crutches, or other mobility aid without their permission.
- Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches. Many people don't realize how much time a person in a wheelchair spends looking up at people. It is uncomfortable for them and distracting from the conversation. When a person makes the effort to be at eye level with someone in a wheelchair it makes them feel more comfortable and relaxed.
- Do not make assumptions about what a person with a physical disability can and cannot do. A person with a physical disability is the best judge of his or her own capabilities. Do not walk up to a wheelchair and start pushing it without asking the person if they would like you to help. It is appropriate, however, to assist with opening a door if the person is having difficulty.
- Do not patronize a person in a wheelchair by patting him or her on the head or shoulder.

Communicating Effectively with a Person who is Deaf or who has a Hearing Disability

- Some people are born deaf or lose their hearing before they learn a spoken language. Others become deaf later in life because of illness, injury, or congenital conditions. Ninety percent of babies who are deaf are born to hearing families; the 10% born to deaf families grow up learning sign language in the same way as hearing babies learn spoken language - by observing (instead of listening) and imitating. Learning English can be a slow process for children deafened before they learned a spoken language and who were raised without a visual language.
- People communicate in many ways--through speech, writing, pictures, and gestures. Most people who are deaf use sign language and finger spelling, although some prefer to lip-read and use their voices. Still others may communicate in writing, and many people who are deaf use a combination of these methods. Ask the person how he or she prefers to communicate.

- The extent of people's hearing loss varies. Although some people who are deaf cannot hear at all, most have some residual hearing and may hear sounds that seem faint, distorted, or incomplete.
- Some people who are deaf use their voices and some do not. Many people who are deaf have had years of speech therapy and training, and some have developed clear speech. Others have developed speech that is understandable upon repetition but that is marked with unclear pronunciation or intonation. Some people who are deaf mouth words without voicing them. Whatever the choice of the individual, remember that the use of voice is not an indicator of intelligence or academic ability.
- Hearing aids do not restore hearing entirely. They make sounds louder, but not clearer. Depending on the extent of their hearing loss, people who are deaf may be able to use hearing aids to help understand speech sounds, monitor the volume of their own voice, and/or recognize sounds around them. Not every person who is deaf wears a hearing aid; some do not benefit from them, some do not feel comfortable using them, and others choose not to use them for personal or cultural reasons.
- Lightly tap a person who is deaf on the shoulder or arm or wave your hand to get their attention. It's important to get the person's attention first, then look directly at them.
- Establish if the person can read lips by speaking clearly, slowly, and expressively using short, simple sentences. If the person can read lips, keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth and do not smoke or chew gum when speaking. If you are male, be aware that facial hair (beard or moustache) makes lip-reading very difficult. The person does not read lips; use a Professional ASL (American Sign Language) Interpreter. In the interim, it may be useful to write brief notes to communicate with the person.
- While you are writing a message for someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, don't talk. The person cannot read your note and your lips at the same time.
- Lip readers or speech readers must watch not only the lips, but also the cheeks, teeth, tongue, neck, and facial expression of the speaker. Still, only about 40% of speech is visible, and many sounds look similar on the lips. For example, most people would find it impossible to tell the difference between words like "bat," "mat," "pat," "bad," "mad," "pad," "ban," "man," and "pan" from lip-reading. Certain combinations of words may also look confusing to the lip reader; for example, "I love fried eggs" could sound like "I love Fridays." Very few people who are deaf rely only on lip-reading to communicate; some use a system of hand signals (cued speech) to guide lip-reading.
- Sign language is a visual language that uses a combination of hand movements and hand shapes to represent concepts, letters, and words. American Sign Language (ASL) is a true language with its own grammatical structure, and can be used to express and receive complex and abstract concepts. In finger spelling, 26 hand shapes represent the letters of the alphabet and messages or individual words are spelled out. Slight pauses indicate the end of a word. Finger spelling is generally used to express a proper name or a particular term.
- Facial expressions are a critical part of communication because they convey the emotions and tone of the conversation. Using sign language without facial expressions is similar to talking in a monotone voice. Using voice and mouth movement also helps a deaf person who has some lip-reading skills and/or residual hearing. However, a loud voice and exaggerated mouth movement interferes with understanding the voiced message.
- People who are deaf appreciate the efforts of hearing people to learn and use sign language. The slow communication speed is a common experience of anyone learning a new language. A person who is deaf will understand a hearing person's message even with mistakes, just as a hearing person will usually understand the spoken message of a person just learning a language who makes some mispronunciations and grammatical errors.
- Good lighting, an unobstructed view of the person you're communicating with, and a non-distracting, non-glare background are important conditions for successful and comfortable visual-

based communication (e.g., signing, lip-reading). If communication has an auditory component, a quiet environment is essential.

- People who are deaf are not always aware if they are making noise that is disturbing to those who can hear it. They appreciate knowing this and being told so politely.
- If people who are deaf wish to have a private conversation, they typically go somewhere private where they cannot be "overseen." A person who is deaf knows that it is acceptable to watch for a pause in a signed conversation, interrupt with a gesture, deliver the message, and leave. Hearing people, on the other hand, tend to avoid watching people signing as they often believe it is a private conversation. Instead of interrupting at an appropriate moment, they may stand by and wait to be acknowledged. However, people who are deaf will likely not understand your intention if you are simply standing by, and will likely continue their conversation. To interrupt a signed conversation, make your desire to interrupt known using eye contact and gestures (no need to wait for a pause in the conversation) then wait without observing until the person you want to talk to turns to you.
- When conversing with groups that include individuals who are deaf, be sure to restate the topic of conversation as a courtesy every time someone joins your conversation or group. At meetings, it is often helpful to write an agenda on a board or an overhead transparency, and indicate the current item under discussion with arrows.
- When conversing with groups that include individuals who are deaf, each person in the group should take turns focus attention on one speaker at a time so everyone is looking in the right direction before the message begins. Ask the last person to speak to acknowledge the next speaker by pointing. When using an interpreter, make sure the message has been translated and understood before moving on to the next speaker. Be sensitive to everyone's desire to participate, especially before changing the topic. Remember that a person who is deaf cannot hear the "drop-off" in voice intonation that many hearing people use to indicate they have finished speaking, and may thus jump in at any pause. The person is not intending to be rude; too much hesitation before jumping in may mean the person losing the opportunity to comment, or may make a comment too late for it to be relevant.
- If communicating using an interpreter, be aware that the interpreter may lag a few words behind, especially if there are names or technical terms to be finger-spelled. Pause occasionally to allow the interpreter time to translate completely and accurately.
- If communicating using an interpreter, direct your speech and eye contact at the person who is deaf or hard of hearing, not at the interpreter. However, the person who is deaf or hard of hearing will need to look at the interpreter and may not make eye contact with you during the conversation.
- A TTY or teletypewriter (also sometimes called a TDD) is a machine that allows people who are deaf or hearing to communicate over phone lines with others who have similar equipment by typing their messages back and forth. To learn more about TTY, contact Diversity Services at 943-0202.
- A telephone relay service enables people who are deaf and hearing to communicate via a dual-party phone system. This way, the hearing person does not need to have a TTY to have a phone conversation with a person who is deaf. The Telus Relay Service (TRS) provides service to Albertans 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. To use TRS, either individual dials a relay service number and a specially trained operator places the call to the other person. The operator announces the caller to the person being called (by voice or by typing on a TTY), then types voiced messages from the hearing caller to the deaf caller, and voices the deaf caller's TTY messages to the hearing caller. All calls are relayed verbatim unless otherwise requested and confidentiality is guaranteed.
- If you telephone a person who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak loudly and clearly and be prepared to repeat who you are and why you are calling.

Communicating Effectively with a Person with a Speech Disability

- Talk to people with speech disabilities as you would talk to anyone else. Speak in your normal tone of voice.
- Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. Give them your undivided attention.
- Be patient when talking with someone who has a disability that affects their speech. Don't interrupt them by trying to guess what they are going to say and finishing their sentence for them.
- Don't pretend to understand the person if you don't. Instead repeat and paraphrase what you did understand and allow the person to respond. Or, tell the person that you do not understand what he or she is trying to say and ask the person to repeat the message, spell it, tell you in a different way, or write it down.
- Ask the person for help in communicating with him or her. If the person uses a communication device such as a manual or electronic communication board, ask the person how best to use it.
- If you need to obtain information quickly, ask short questions that require brief answers or a head nod. However, try not to insult the person's intelligence with over-simplification.

Communicating Effectively with a Person with a Cognitive Disability

- Treat adults with cognitive disabilities as adults, not children.
- When speaking to someone who has a cognitive disability, try to be alert to their responses so that you can adjust your method of communication if necessary. For example, some people may benefit from simple, direct sentences or from supplementary visual forms of communication, such as gestures, diagrams, or demonstrations.
- Avoid using abstract language. Be specific without being too simplistic. Using humour is fine, but do not interpret a lack of response as rudeness. Some people may not grasp the meaning of sarcasm or other subtleties of language.
- People with brain injuries may have short-term memory deficits and may repeat themselves or require information to be repeated.
- People with auditory perceptual problems may need to have directions repeated, and may take notes to help them remember directions or the sequence of tasks. They may benefit from watching a task demonstrated.
- People with perceptual or "sensory overload" problems may become disoriented or confused if there is too much to absorb at once. Provide information gradually and clearly. Reduce background noise if possible.
- Repeat information using different wording or a different communication approach if necessary. Allow time for the information to be fully understood.
- Don't pretend to understand if you do not. Ask the person to repeat what was said.
- In conversation, people with cognitive disabilities may respond slowly, so give them time. Be patient, flexible, and supportive. Don't try to interrupt and guess what they are going to say.
- Some people who have a cognitive disability may be easily distracted. Try not to interpret distraction as rudeness.
- Do not expect all people to be able to read well. Some people may not read at all.