

## **TEN TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES\***

1. Speak directly rather than through a companion or the sign language interpreter who may be present.
2. Offer to shake hands when introduced. People with limited hand use or artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
3. Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when meeting someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.

When dining with a friend with a visual disability, ask if you can describe what is on his or her plate using the clock to describe the location of the food, i.e., potato is at 3 o'clock.

4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people of short stature or people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair or scooter. Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their wheelchairs or scooters as extensions of their bodies.

The same goes for people with service animals. Never distract a work animal from their job without the owner's permission.

7. Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
8. Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone who is of short stature or who is in a wheelchair or on crutches.
9. Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get at his or her attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to discriminate your speaking voice. Do not raise your voice. Speak slowly and clearly in a normal tone of voice.

10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITIES

### **I. Speak Directly.**

Use clear simple communications. Most people, whether or not they have a mental health disability, appreciate it. If someone is having difficulty processing sounds or information, as often occurs in psychiatric disorders, your message is more apt to be clearly understood. Speak directly to the person; do not speak through a companion or service provider.

### **II. Offer to Shake Hands When Introduced**

Always use the same good manners in interacting with a person who has a psychiatric disability that you would use in meeting any other person. Shaking hands is a uniformly acceptable and recognized signal of friendliness in American culture. A lack of simple courtesy is unacceptable to most people, and tends to make everyone uncomfortable.

### **III. Make Eye Contact and Be Aware of Body Language**

Like others, people with mental illness sense your discomfort. Look people in the eye when speaking to them. Maintain a relaxed posture.

### **IV. Listen Attentively**

If a person has difficulty speaking, or speaks in a manner that is difficult for you to understand, listen carefully — then *wait for them to finish speaking*. If needed, clarify what they have said. Ask short questions that can be answered by a “yes” or a “no” or by nodding the head. Never pretend to understand. Reflect what you have heard, and let the person respond.

### **V. Treat Adults as Adults**

Always use common courtesy. Do not assume familiarity by using the person’s first name or by touching their shoulder or arm, unless you know the person well enough to do so. Do not patronize, condescend, or threaten. Do not make decisions for the person, or assume their preferences.

### **VI. Do Not Give Unsolicited Advice or Assistance**

If you offer any kind of assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to the person’s response and/or ask for suggestions or instructions. *Do not* panic or summon an ambulance or the police if a person appears to be experiencing a mental health crisis. Calmly ask the person how you can help.

## **VII. Do Not Blame the Person**

A person who has a mental illness has a complex, biomedical condition that is sometimes difficult to control, even with proper treatment. A person who is experiencing a mental illness cannot “just shape up” or “pull himself up by the bootstraps.” It is rule, insensitive, and ineffective to tell or expect the person to do so.

## **VIII. Question the Accuracy of the Media Stereotypes of Mental Illness**

The movies and the media have sensationalized mental illness. In reality, despite the overabundance of “psychotic killers” portrayed in movies and television, studies have shown that people with mental illness are far more likely to be *victims* of crime than to victimize others. Most people with mental illness never experience symptoms which include violent behavior. As with the general public, about 1% - 5% of all people with mental illness are exceptionally easily provoked to violence. (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 1990)

## **IX. Relax!**

The most important thing to remember in interacting with people who have mental health disabilities is to BE YOURSELF. Do not be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions that seem to relate to a mental health disability, such as “I’m CRAZY about him” or “This job is driving me NUTS.” ASK the person how he feels about what you have said. Chances are, you get a flippant remark and a laugh in answer.

## **X. See the PERSON**

Beneath all the symptoms and behaviors someone with a mental illness may exhibit is a PERSON who has many of the same wants, needs, dreams and desires as anyone else. Don’t avoid people with mental health disabilities. If you are fearful or uncomfortable, learn more about mental illness. Kindness, courtesy, and patience usually smooth interactions with all kinds of people, including people who have a mental health disability.

This is the **Last and Greatest Commandment**: Treat people with mental health disabilities as you would wish to be treated yourself.

Adapted by Mary Lee Stocks, MSW, LISW, from the *Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities*, originally developed by the National Center for Access Unlimited/Chicago and United Cerebral Palsy Associations/Washington, D.C.; and a video and script developed by Irene M. Ward & Associates/Columbus, Ohio, partially supported through Ohio Development Disabilities Planning Council Grant #92-13 (1993)

## TIPS FOR INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND \*

When you meet me do not be ill at ease. It will help both of us if you remember these simple points of courtesy:

1. I'm an ordinary person, just blind. You don't need to raise your voice or address me as if I were a child. Don't ask my spouse what I want – "Cream in the coffee?" – ask me.
2. If I am walking with you, don't grab my arm; let me take yours. I'll keep a half step behind, to anticipate curbs and steps.
3. I want to know who is in the room with me. Speak when you enter. Introduce me to the others. Include children, and tell me if there is a cat or dog. Guide my hand to a chair.
4. The door to a room, cabinet, or to a car left partially open is a hazard to me.
5. At dinner, I will not have trouble with ordinary table skills.
6. Don't avoid words like "see." I use them too. "I'm always glad to see you".
7. I don't want pity. But don't talk about the "wonderful compensations" of blindness. My sense of smell, touch, or hearing did not improve when I became blind. I rely on them more and, therefore, may get more information through those senses than you do – that's all.
8. If I'm your houseguest, show me the bathroom, closet, dresser, window – the light switch too. I would like to know whether the lights are on.
9. I'll discuss blindness with you if you're curious, but it's an old story to me. I have as many other interests as you do.
10. Don't think of me as just a blind person. I'm just a person who happens to be blind.

Note: In all 50 states, the law requires drivers to yield the right of way when they see my extended white cane. Only the blind may carry white canes. You see more blind persons today walking alone. Not because there are more of us, but because we have learned to make our way.

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## **TIPS FOR TALKING TO A PERSON WITH HEARING LOSS**

- **FACE the hard of hearing person directly and on the same level whenever possible.**

Do not turn and walk away while still talking. When you walk away, the hard of hearing person can no longer hear you or read your lips.\*

- **KEEP your hands away from your face while talking.**
- **SPEAK in a normal fashion, without shouting. Speak clearly and more slowly than usual.**

If a person has difficulty understanding something, find a different way of saying the same thing rather than repeating the original words over and over.

Speak slowly. Sometimes it is difficult for a hard of hearing person to distinguish between background noise and speech.\*

- **NEVER talk from another room. Be sure to get the person's attention before you start speaking to him or her.**
- **REDUCE background noises when holding conversations – turn off the radio or TV.**

If you are eating, chewing, smoking, etc, while talking, your speech will be more difficult to understand.

- **MAKE sure that the light is not shining in the person's eyes when you are talking to him or her.**
- **RECOGNIZE that hard of hearing people hear and understand less well when they are tired or ill.**

\*Comments provided by a hard of hearing person.

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