

Etiquette for Meeting People with Disabilities

Meeting someone with a disability can be awkward. Here are some pointers to help both of you feel comfortable:

- When greeting someone who doesn't have use of their hands feel free to pat them on the shoulder or offer a hug as a greeting. If you forget this tip and offer your hand, don't beat yourself up with embarrassment. We are all creatures of habit!
- Feel free to ask people about their disabilities. Ignoring an obvious physical condition can make both parties feel uncomfortable. Talking about a condition helps others move beyond their curiosities. Just don't dwell on it.
- Before jumping in and helping a disabled person, ask if they would like your help. Recognize it's okay to offer help and it's okay to be declined.
- When talking with people who use wheelchairs, sit down so that you can have direct, friendly eye contact.
- It's fine to use words like "see," "hear," "run," and "walk" when talking to people with disabilities. For example, saying, "See you soon!" to a blind person is fine.
- Do not use words like "cripple," "afflicted," "suffering," or "victim" when referring to people with disabilities. These terms tend to be demeaning and connote powerlessness.
- If you don't understand someone who has speech impairments the first time, feel free to ask him or her to repeat their statements.
- If an interpreter is helping you speak with a person who is deaf, make sure you talk to the deaf person, not the interpreter.
- People who are blind hear as well as anyone. Don't speak loudly when talking with them.
- Service dogs, such as Seeing Eye dogs or Hearing Ear dogs are on the job. Avoid petting or playing with them because they shouldn't be distracted from their work.
- When engaging in small talk with a disabled person, avoid discussing other people you know with disabilities. Such a discussion tends to dwell on physical conditions and feels shallow. In addition, it prevents you from getting to know the person for who they are.
- Tactfully telling a person with a disability that they are inspiring is complimentary, but continuing to focus on their condition or amazing ability to compensate feels patronizing.

