



COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

TIPS FOR MORE RESPECTFUL AND EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

Living with a disability is a normal fact of life for more than ten percent of Coloradans. Disabilities may be apparent or invisible and include physical, sensory, intellectual, perceptual, and mental health conditions. Below are tips for communicating respectfully and comfortably with people who have disabilities.

TIP 1: BE RESPECTFUL

- When talking with a person with a disability, always speak directly to that person rather than to a companion, sign language interpreter, or personal assistant who may be present.
- Give focused, unhurried attention to a person who has difficulty speaking. If you don't understand, ask them to repeat. To clarify something you misunderstood, repeat what you thought you heard in the form of a question.
- Be considerate of the extra time it may take a person with a disability to get some things done.
- Do not make assumptions about a person's capabilities based on their disability. All people have a variety of strengths, weaknesses, skills, and abilities.
- Do not refer to, talk about, or ask personal questions about a person's disability, unless it is relevant to the conversation or the person gives permission.
- When planning an event or meeting, make sure the meeting is fully physically and programmatically accessible. Include a way to request accommodations on any promotional materials.
- Listen attentively. Rather than correcting or speaking for a person, be patient and wait for that person to finish what they are saying on their own.
- Use the person's preferred method of communication. People with disabilities related to speech communicate in many ways. It is important to find out the person's preferred method of communication and use it.
- Never assume a person has a specific type of disability just because they have trouble speaking. There are a variety of disabilities, such as stroke, cerebral palsy, and deafness that may involve speech impairments.
- Be respectful, but do not endanger yourself. For example, in a situation where masks must be worn and someone needs to see your facial expressions to communicate, explore alternative safety measures with the person (e.g., talking at a distance or using a transparent physical barrier).

TIP 2: WORDS MATTER

- Use "Person First Language." Speak about a person with a disability by first referring to the person first, and then the disability. Refer to "people with disabilities" rather than to "disabled people." Some individuals may prefer different terminology, there is an emerging movement of people preferring identity first language (autistics, disabled, etc.) please respect that.
- Try to avoid words and descriptions that connote negativity. For example, refer to individuals using a wheelchair as a "wheelchair user" instead of "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound."
- When meeting a person who is blind or low vision, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. In a group, always identify yourself before you speak, and identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- When you are describing individuals, places, or things to people who are blind or have low vision, do not leave things out or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant. Always use descriptive vocabulary and avoid phrases such as "over there."
- When giving presentations, always describe graphs and images so people who are blind or have low vision understand what you are presenting.
- Never use patronizing or condescending language or tone, especially with adults.
- Do not describe individuals with disabilities as courageous, brave, special, superhuman, inspirational, or other exaggerated terms and avoid excessive praise when people with disabilities accomplish normal tasks.
- It is perfectly acceptable to use phrases such as "I've gotta run" or "See you soon" that seem to relate to a person's disability.
- Do not elevate your speech when interacting with people who have disabilities - maintain a natural tone, unless they ask you to speak louder.

TIP 3: HONOR PERSONAL SPACE

- Respect the desires of the person. Remember it is not always necessary to provide guided assistance, but you can offer to guide people if they would like assistance. If you see a person who is blind or low vision about to encounter a dangerous situation, be calm and clear. Never grab the person by the arm and push them forward.
- Never lean or hang on, touch, or move a person's assistive device, such as a cane, wheelchair, crutch, or communication board. These devices are part of the personal body space of the people who use them.
- When a person has a service animal, never pet, feed, or distract the animal without first asking the owner for permission.

TIP 4: ASK FIRST & RELAX

- Always ask before you try to assist someone. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions. If you are unsure about what to do, just ask! Offer an apology if you forget a courtesy. Demonstrate a willingness to communicate.
- If you have additional questions, you can reach out to your agency's ADA Coordinator, the Rocky Mountain ADA Center, your local Center for Independent Living, or the Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition.