

PATIENT POPULATION COMPETENCY – PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Some of the patients we serve have disabilities. This just-in-time training provides guidance on etiquette for interacting with people with disabilities as well as disability-specific information, so you understand what is respectful.

People with Disabilities are Human:

- Disabilities are not contagious.
- They have feelings and emotions and can perceive the world around them.
- They are unique individuals, no two disabilities or people with disabilities are the same.
- They deserve to be treated with respect and allowed dignity.
- See them for the individuals that they are and not for their disability.
- Do not talk down to them literally or figuratively.
- If someone uses a wheelchair, sit in a chair or kneel to communicate with them.
- It is never appropriate to mock or imitate a person with a disability.
- Be sensitive to the person's feelings and experiences and find ways to help them navigate the situation.

Person First or Identity First?:

“Person with a disability”



“Disabled person”

For **people** who prefer **person-first** language, the choice recognizes that a **human** is **first** and foremost a **person**: They have a disorder, but that disorder doesn't define them. It emphasizes the value and worth of the individual not the disability.

For **people** who prefer **identify-first** language it emphasizes that the **disability** plays a role in who the **person** is and reinforces disability as a positive cultural identifier.

- People with disability often have very strong preferences for either identity-first, or person-first language.
- **A good rule of thumb is when first interacting with a disabled person, use person-first language first.**
- If the person with a disability indicates a preference for one or the other, then respect and affirm each individual person with disability's choice of language they use about themselves.

Adults with Disabilities:

- Adults with disabilities are adults and deserve to be treated and spoken to as adults.
- **Never use the terms:**
 - “Handicapped”
 - “Crippled”
 - “Retarded”
 - “Stupid”
 - “Confined to”
 - “Suffers from”
 - Or other generally derogatory terms
- DO NOT make decisions for them.
- Provide them with every option you would provide those without disabilities.

Not Sure How to Interact? Ask!:

- **Never** assume that someone with a disability needs your help.
- **Always** offer assistance or help before doing something.
- Respect their choice, even it looks like they are struggling.
- DO NOT continue to ask, “are you sure?”
- If there is a dangerous situation, help just as you would help someone without a disability.

Personal Space:

- Be respectful of personal space.
- A cane, walker, wheelchair, power chair, scooter are all considered part of someone’s personal space.
 - **DO NOT** lean on someone’s chair.
 - **DO NOT** touch or move someone’s assistive device without asking first.
 - **DO NOT** put something in someone’s carry basket without asking.
- **Always** ask someone’s permission to put your hands on them. Touch can be comforting to some but distressing to others.

Not All Disabilities are Visible:

- There are a number of disabilities that are not visible or obvious, be respectful and accommodating to all disabilities.
 - Example: After giving someone a set of instructions they may ask you to write it down for them. This may be because the person has a learning disability that makes written communication easier.
- **Hidden disabilities are just as real as visible disabilities.**

Mobility Disabilities:

- People with mobility disabilities may use a wheelchair, walker, cane, scooter, crutches, power chair or other mobile assistive devices.
- Never think of someone who uses mobility aids as “sick.”
- Walk next to the person, not behind or in front of them.
- Be respectful of their personal space.
- Never move someone’s assistive device without asking them first.
- If they need help, ask them how you can help them.
- Maintain adequate space for maneuvering their device.

Visual Disabilities:

- Talk to the person directly, not their guide or companion. A loss of sight is not a loss of intellect.
- When entering a room, announce yourself to the person and indicate when you leave.
- **Never** pull or drag someone and **never** grab their cane or their service dog’s harness.
- Give useful, descriptive directions (i.e. “walk straight 20 feet”).
- Some people with visual disabilities may rely on a guide dog for assistance. **Never touch, pet, or talk to** the service animal WITHOUT permission.
 - Do not be offended if the person declines your request. The animal is considered to be “working” and needs to remain focused.
- Do not ask how long they have been blind.
- Leave doors all the way open or all the way closed.

Guiding Someone with a Visual Disability:

- Ask “would you like me to guide you?”
- Offering your left elbow is a dignified way to lead someone who is visually impaired.
- Do not be afraid to tell the person that you are an inexperienced guide and to ask for feedback and tips to improve.
- Use audible cues:
 - Indicate when you are going over a door threshold.
 - Tap a chair to indicate its location and say “here is the chair.”

Hearing Disabilities:

- People with hearing disabilities may not always self-identify.
- People with hearing assistive devices (cochlear implant, hearing aid) are not able to filter out background noise. Take them to a quieter area to have a discussion.
- People who are deaf can speak, but because they cannot hear themselves, it may sound loud and difficult to understand.
- American Sign Language is its own language.
- Lip reading is **not** an effective communication strategy.

Interacting with an Interpreter:

- Speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter.
- Speak normally, at an even pace, with relatively short segments.
- Remember the interpreter is a medium for communication, not the source. If you don’t feel you received the right response, ask again in a different way.
- **Avoid:**
 - Idiomatic speech (“it’s raining cats and dogs,” “piece of cake,” “break a leg.”)
 - Complicated sentences, fragmented sentences.
 - Changing ideas or topics mid-sentence.
 - Asking multiple questions at a time.
- Be patient. Interpretation takes time.
- Be mindful of what you say. The interpreter’s job is to interpret *everything*.

Developmental Disabilities:

- Speak clearly using simple sentences and ideas to convey meaning. Break down complex ideas into smaller parts.
- **DO NOT** use baby talk or talk down to the individual.
- Let them finish their sentences and ideas. Allow them to take their time.
 - Do not interrupt them.
 - Do not complete the sentence for them.
- Most rely on a routine. A new environment or alteration to their routine may cause extreme distress.
- Do not nod your head in agreement if you don’t understand.
 - Repeat back what you heard and ask “is that correct?”
 - Ask them kindly to repeat back what you said as well.
- Busy environments may overstimulate or cause fear/confusion that they may not be able to verbalize.