

Etiquette for working with disabled people

The social model of disability reminds us that often our attitudes could be more disabling than the person's own impairment.

It is never appropriate to ask someone about the details of their impairment in a public place – such details should be confidential. Think about how you would feel if someone expected you to discuss your medical history in public. Any request for this information should only ever be made in private and only if that information is absolutely essential to the task at hand. In most cases what you need to know is how you can help the person, not 'what is wrong with them'.

Comments like 'you don't look disabled to me' are totally unnecessary and very hurtful – an impairment does not have to be visible to others - it could result in acute or chronic pain, severe fatigue or mood changes.

Offer to help, but don't assume you know what is needed. Ask the disabled person how you can help them. Even if the disabled person is accompanied, always speak directly to the disabled person, make eye contact and smile (if appropriate!). Speaking only to a person accompanying a disabled person is very rude, as is assuming that the disabled person cannot or will not speak for themselves. Remember that anyone can develop an impairment at any time in their life - next week that person struggling to communicate or to move around could be you.

People with hearing impairments

If you are communicating with a person who has a sign language interpreter or other communication support worker, look at the deaf person, not their support worker, even if the deaf person is looking at the support worker. This difficult to do, but it is important. Interpreting is very hard work, allow for regular change of interpreter or rest breaks.

People who need to lip-read have to concentrate very hard. It is extremely tiring - they may be able to get a few words in each sentence, but much will be guessed or unknown. You can make it easier by sticking to the planned topics and avoiding jargon, or making sure the person understands that you have changed the subject by checking with them.

Remember that a lip-reader needs to see you face on, so please don't turn away, or put your hand over your mouth, or talk to your feet. Try to avoid standing in front of a window or other light source, as that will leave your face in shadow.

People with visual impairments

Most people with a visual impairment can see enough to navigate in a well-lit area - that does not mean they are not blind/partially sighted (which is largely determined by how well they can read print). Total visual loss (complete blindness) is extremely rare.

If communicating with a person who has a visual impairment, and you need to move to another place, you should ask if they would like to be guided. If they say yes, ask them how they prefer (most will want to walk a little behind and hold your elbow – if the space becomes too narrow, drop your elbow back and they will naturally follow behind you).

People who work with an assistance dog

If the person is accompanied by an assistance dog, please greet the person first, not the dog. The dog is working and should only be approached with the owner's permission and when the dog is out of its harness. If you are spending a lot of time together, do remember to ask if the dog needs a drink or a toilet break or a rest break when you ask about the person's needs.

Some assistance dogs work with people with a hearing impairment or epilepsy, so you should not assume that the disabled person has a visual impairment.

So far the court cases which have occurred have imposed a fine (a penalty payment) of £1,000 for a single instance of refused admission for a person with an assistance dog (ie this could be someone refused access to a pub or restaurant just once).

People with mobility impairments

Do not touch someone's wheelchair without their explicit permission. It is the equivalent of touching part of their body and is an invasion of their personal space – which can feel like a threat or a sexual advance.

Don't assume that someone who has paralysis or limited movement also has no feeling. These sensations involve different nerves - the person may actually be in such pain that the slightest nudge against them or their chair is excruciating.

People with hidden impairments

Please warn others if you are going to set off a sudden loud noise, a camera flash or any kind of strobe (flashing) light – sometimes these things can trigger pain, distress or a seizure. If someone has a seizure they may well fall down and they will probably twitch their arms and legs, they may grimace (pull faces) and they could urinate.

Always note the time the seizure started - if it continues for more than five minutes then an ambulance should always be called. When the seizure stops, check if the person is breathing and roll them carefully onto their side in the recovery position. If the person is not breathing, **FIRST** call an ambulance, **THEN** start cardio-pulmonary respiration.

Despite what you may have heard previously, you should **NEVER** try to put anything in the person's mouth or restrict their movements at all (you could break bones or teeth).

If the person is in danger, move the danger away from the person if at all possible. If not possible, carefully roll the person away from the danger instead – but be careful as this is very difficult whilst someone is having a seizure.

People with mental health issues

Try not to make any assumptions about what the person can and cannot cope with or what they can or cannot achieve. It is especially important to consult the person and ensure that they are involved in all decisions about their situation.

Appropriate language for disability matters

Words to be avoided:	Preferable terms:
VICTIM OF... CRIPPLED BY... SUFFERING FROM... AFFLICTED BY...	Use person who has... person with... person who experienced...
WHEELCHAIR BOUND	Use wheelchair user or person who uses a wheelchair.
MENTALLY HANDICAPPED	Use person with learning disability.
MENTAL ILLNESS	Use mental health system survivor or person with experience of mental distress. Don't disclose the person's diagnosis to others without their explicit consent.
MENTAL HANDICAPPED CRIPPLE INVALID (literally means not valid)	Use disabled person.
HANDICAP	Use disability or impairment as appropriate.
The DISABLED	Assumes homogeneity, which is false Use disabled person / people.
THE BLIND	Use people who are blind / partially sighted.
THE DEAF	Use deaf people or people with a hearing impairment.
DEAF AND DUMB	Use person with impairment(s) of speech and hearing.
EPILEPTIC / DIABETIC	Avoid labelling the person by their condition, Use person with epilepsy / diabetes.
FIT(S)	the person has (had) a seizure
	Alternatively: person with a mobility impairment person with a dexterity impairment person with a sensory impairment person with a visual / hearing impairment person with epilepsy

A few final points

We now refer to people living with HIV or AIDS as disabled people.

Some job descriptions may be inherently discriminatory. For example, if driving is not the main purpose of a post, then it is unlikely to be reasonable to require that all successful applicants can drive - this discriminates against those who are not permitted to drive.

Alcohol or drug abuse (when current) is not a disability in itself, but some of the effects may be and the person is protected by the law once they abstain from their former habit. Trans-sexualism and intersex conditions plus the treatments for them could potentially amount to disabilities, depending on the effects on the person's health.

Pregnancy is not a disability, but it may produce health conditions which meet the definition.

Conditions with intermittent effects, like multiple sclerosis and many cancers, are covered by the law from the point of diagnosis, even where no symptoms are apparent.

The legal definition is that a disabled person must have a physical or mental condition which has effects on everyday activities which are significant, adverse and long-term, where long-term is defined as one year or the remainder of life, whichever is the shorter. The recent change to the legal definition of disability means that some people who experience stress may be considered to have a disability.

There are currently three terms used to include all disabled people:

- **Disabled person** - this includes people with physical and/or sensory impairment, specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and hidden chronic medical conditions.
- **Mental health system survivor** - usually this is only used by politicised disabled people.
- **Person with a learning disability.**

Usually, no other terms are necessary. Occasionally discrimination on the grounds of disability can be legally justified (eg on health and safety grounds or to protect academic standards) but this should never be done without discussion with an expert! Always discuss the situation with your institution's disability specialist.