FACT SHEET

COMMUNICATION WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

GENERAL TIPS

- Speak to a person with a disability as you would speak to anyone else. Speak in an age-appropriate tone and treat adults as adults.
- If a person with a disability is accompanied by another person, such as a carer, you should still speak directly to the person with disability.
- Put the person first, not their disability. For example, use the term ‘a person with disability’ rather than ‘a disabled person’.
- Try to avoid negative phrases such as ‘suffers from’ and ‘crippled’. Use the phrase ‘wheelchair user’ rather than ‘wheelchair bound’.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

- Remember that someone’s personal space can include their wheelchair and crutches. Don’t touch or push a person’s wheelchair, and don’t move their crutches or walking stick without their permission.
- When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair, try to find something to sit on to be at eye level with them.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH A VISION IMPAIRMENT

- When you meet people who have a vision impairment, always address them by name and introduce yourself.
- Speak clearly and in a normal voice – there is no need to raise your voice.
- Remember that people with vision impairment can’t rely on the same visual cues as people without a vision impairment. Make sure you verbalise any thoughts or feelings.
- If a person is accompanied by a guide dog, don’t pat it, feed it or distract it while it’s in a harness. A dog in a harness is working to support its owner.
- When you enter or leave a room, say something to make sure that the person who has a vision impairment won’t be embarrassed by speaking to an empty space.

Source: https://www.afdo.org.au/resource-communication-with-people-with-disabilities/

Greater Dandenong Disability Inclusive Volunteering

FACT SHEET

COMMUNICATION WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF/HARD OF HEARING

- Gain the person's attention before speaking. Try a gentle tap on the shoulder, a wave or some other visual signal to get the person's attention.
- Face the person directly and maintain eye contact.
- Make sure your mouth is visible – don't cover it with your hand or any other object as you talk.
- Look directly at the person while speaking and don't speak too fast or too slow.
- Don't exaggerate your mouth movements – this will only make it more difficult to lip-read.
- Use short sentences.
- Keep your volume at a natural level – don't shout.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILTY

- Make sure you have the person's attention before you start talking. Try using their name or making eye contact.
- Keep your questions simple and your answers easy to understand.
- Remember that your body language is important because people with an intellectual disability often rely on visual cues.
- Be prepared to use visual information or to get visual information from people with an intellectual disability.
- Be specific and direct. Avoid talking using abstracts, acronyms, metaphors or puns.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness is a health issue that can significantly affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves and interacts with other people. Mental illness is a general term that refers to a group of illnesses including, but not limited to:

- Mood disorders (such as depression and bipolar disorder)
- Anxiety disorders
- Psychotic disorders (such as schizophrenia and some forms of bipolar disorder).

(cont. on next page)

FACT SHEET

COMMUNICATION WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS (CONT.)

One of the common mistakes people make when talking to someone with a mental illness is that they talk too much. When we are talking, we are not listening. The best thing to do is to say less and listen more.

- Be respectful to the person. When someone feels respected and heard, they are more likely to return respect and consider what you have to say.
- Some people with paranoia may be frightened, so be aware that they may need more body space than you.
- Instead of directing the conversation at them with 'you' statements, use 'I' statements instead.
- Ease into the conversation gradually. It may be that the person is not in a place to talk, and that is OK.
- Be sure to speak in a relaxed and calm manner.
- Talk to them in a space that is comfortable, where you won't likely be interrupted and where there are likely minimal distractions.
- Do not lie to them, as it will usually break any rapport you might want to establish.
- Be aware of a person becoming upset or confused by your conversation with them.
- Listen to the person and try to understand what they are communicating.
- Communicate in a straightforward manner and stick to one topic at a time.
- Be a good listener, be responsive and make eye contact with a caring approach.
- Give them the opportunity to talk and open up but don't press.
- Reduce any defensiveness by sharing your feelings and looking for common ground.
- If needed, set limits with the person as you would others. For example, "I only have five minutes to talk to you" or "If you scream, I will not be able to talk to you."

Things to Avoid Doing:

- Criticizing, blaming or raising your voice at them.
- Talking too much, too rapidly, too loudly. Silence and pauses are OK.
- Showing any form of hostility towards them.
- Avoid excessive whispering, joking and laughing as these behaviors could be viewed as dangerous to someone with paranoia.
- Assuming things about them or their situation.
- Being sarcastic or making jokes about their condition.
- Patronising them or saying anything condescending.

Source: https://www.afdo.org.au/resource-communication-with-people-with-disabilities/