

# FACT SHEET

## DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

Communicating with a person with disability can seem daunting to some. You may be concerned that you will embarrass yourself or a person with disability by saying or doing the wrong thing. Though these concerns usually come from a good place, it is unnecessary. The most important thing to remember is to treat each person with respect.

The tips in this fact sheet are based on what is currently broadly accepted in Australia. It is important to remember that everyone is different and will have their own preferences. When communicating with a person with disability, you should ask the person what works for them, and respect their wishes.

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### BASIC TIPS

- Avoid asking personal questions about someone's disability.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person to do or say something.
- Be polite and patient when offering assistance, and wait until your offer is accepted. Listen or ask for specific instructions. Be prepared for your offer to be refused.
- Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Offer an apology if you feel you've caused embarrassment. Keep a sense of humour and be willing to communicate.

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### SPEAKING OR WRITING

- Refer to a person's disability only when necessary and appropriate.
- Refer to the individual first, then to their disability (for example, "person with disability," rather than "disabled person").
- The following terms should be avoided because they can have negative meanings: invalid, able-bodied, wheelchair-bound, victim, crippled, defect, suffers from, handicap, a patient.
- Avoid terms that imply that people with disability are overly courageous, brave, or special, such as "inspirational".

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### FACE TO FACE COMMUNICATION

- Use a normal tone of voice when welcoming a person with disability. Do not raise your voice unless you are asked to.
- Shake hands even if the person has limited hand use or wears an artificial limb. A left-hand shake is acceptable. If the person cannot shake hands, acknowledge them with a smile and a spoken greeting.
- When planning a meeting or other event, think about specific accommodations a person with disability might need. If a barrier cannot be avoided, let the person know ahead of time.
- Look and speak directly to the person with disability, not just to the people accompanying them, including interpreters.
- Don't patronize or talk down to people with disability. Treat people with respect and dignity.
- Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort.
- Never pretend to understand what a person is saying if you don't. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase, or offer them a pen and paper.
- If requested to by the individual, offer a person who is blind or has low vision your elbow or shoulder, to guide rather than propel them.
- It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon" or "I'd better be running along".

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## MENTAL ILLNESS

People with mental illness may at times have difficulty dealing with the tasks and interactions of daily life. Their condition may interfere with their ability to feel, think or relate to others. One of the main obstacles they face is the attitudes that people have about them. Because it is a non-visible disability, chances are you will not even realise that the person has a mental health condition.

- Stress can affect a person's ability to function. Try to keep the pressure of any given situation to a minimum.
- People with mental illness may have different ways of coping with their disability. Some may have trouble picking up on social cues; others may be overly sensitive. One person may be very hyperactive, while someone else may appear lethargic. Treat each person as an individual. Ask what will make them most comfortable and respect their needs to the maximum extent possible.

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## SOCIAL EVENTS

Work-related social events are an important part of developing a healthy work environment. Social events do not just refer to the annual Christmas party or the family picnic day, but include things like Friday night drinks and sporting groups. Just like any other employee, employees with disability should be included in these events, with considerations made for issues such as:

- Access
- Transport/parking
- Toilet facilities
- Noise levels; and
- Any other relevant factors.

Don't assume that a person cannot or does not want to be involved simply because they have disability. Adjustments can almost always be made so that everyone can be included.