

Interacting with People with Disabilities

If you have never had the opportunity to meet people with disabilities, this aspect of volunteering will be heartwarming. But do you know how to act, speak, react, or show respect to that individual? **A person with a disability is an individual first and is entitled to the same dignity, respect, and considerations expected by anyone.**

Speaking:

- U Avoid using “us and them” language when speaking of people with disabilities versus people who are able bodied.
- U Always address a person with a disability directly. Do not speak about them as if they are not present.
- U Do not shout. Hearing aids make noises louder, not clearer. Blindness does not affect hearing.
- U When speaking to someone with a hearing impairment speak slowly, clearly and face them directly while speaking.
- U If a person has difficulty speaking, allow them to finish their sentence. If you do not understand what they are saying, tell them so. Do not pretend you understood if you didn't.
- U When speaking to a person with a disability who used a wheelchair, find yourself a chair or crouch down at a comfortable distance so that you can converse on the same level.
- U People are not confined to or bound to wheelchairs, they USE these devices for mobility and enhance their freedom. Please say “an individual who uses a wheelchair”.

Acting/Reacting:

- U Treat adults as adults, only help a person with a disability if they ask for assistance. You may aid, but if it is declined, do not be offended.
- U When assisting an individual with a disability always ask “how” you can help. Do not take over.
- U Do not push a person's wheelchair, grab their arm or try to help without asking first. Never move someone's crutches, walkers, canes, service animal or other mobility aid without permission.
- U When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and tell them you are leaving before you walk away.

In general, just remember...

- U The individual is always placed before the disability. It is a person with a disability not a disabled person.
- U Never refer to a person by their disability. EXAMPLE – “paraplegic or blind”
- U Completely avoid emotionally laden terms such as “suffering with a disease or afflicted with, burdened by. Please use the wording “challenged”.
- U When writing, or speaking about individuals with disabilities always focus on ability and accomplishments and quality of life.

Non-Verbal or Limited Expression

Here are some common directions using American Sign Language that you might need to enhance communication during sessions.

