



Delta Gamma
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Disability Etiquette Guide

and other helpful information on addressing,
interacting and using appropriate language with
individuals who are blind or have low vision





Introduction

This guide was compiled by caring Delta Gamma staff, volunteers and community partners and is meant as a resource of best practices for interacting with individuals with disabilities. Without a doubt, the words we use to refer to persons with disabilities matter. This language, however, has evolved over time, and terms that were commonly used and accepted may no longer be acceptable. It is important, therefore, to not only use appropriate language to ensure people feel included and there is no barrier to full and meaningful participation but to also raise awareness about how language has evolved over time and what language is appropriate to use today. Because language changes over time, it is important to review disability etiquette frequently.

This document contains recommendations for language you might use when talking and/or writing about disability and other subjects, especially when talking or writing about our philanthropy Service for Sight. It is important to note that the world, communication and people are ever-changing. Language is a key tool in combating ableism, and it is our hope that you always use your best judgment and serve others with your heart. If you ever have questions about how to interact with an individual with a disability, it is always best to ask the individual with whom you are interacting directly.

When interacting with someone who is blind or has low vision, be yourself, relax and speak with the person in a normal tone of voice. Do not feel afraid to approach someone who is blind, and if you have trouble determining if they need assistance, simply ask – it is the kind thing to do. People living with blindness or low vision will let you know their needs.

General Guidelines for Talking About Disability

There are many words to use and ways to refer to individuals with a disability. The following information is meant to answer some questions about what language to use and not to use.

The chart below features some ways that people with disabilities are described. This list includes “outdated language” – these are terms and phrases that should not be used. This list also includes recommended language, which should be used to describe different disabilities and individuals. People have individual preferences for how you refer to them. What is “okay” for some people may not be “okay” for others. If you don’t know what to say, just ask how a person likes to be described.

Disability	Outdated Language	Recommended Language
General Disability	Handicapped or the disabled (avoid euphemisms like differently abled, disability, special, etc)	Person with a disability
No Disability	Normal, healthy	Person without a disability, typical
Blind or Visual Impairment	the blind, the visually impaired	Person who is living with blindness or low vision, person who is blind/has low vision
Deaf or Hearing Impairment	Invalid, deaf-and-dumb, deaf-mute	Deaf or hard-of-hearing, person who is deaf or hard-of-hearing
Speech/ Communication Disability	Dumb, “one who talks bad,” mute	Person with a speech/ communication disability, person who communicates with alternative devices or eyes
Learning Disability	Retarded, slow, brain-damaged, “special ed,” learning disabled	Person with a learning or cognitive disability, tailored education
Mental Health Disability	Hyper-sensitive, psycho, crazy, insane, wacko, nuts	Person with a psychiatric disability, person with a mental health disability
Mobility/Physical Disability	Handicapped, physically challenged, “special,” deformed, cripple, wheelchair-bound, lame	Person with a mobility or physical disability, person who uses a wheelchair or mobility chair, or is a wheelchair user
Emotional Disability	Emotionally disturbed, crazy	Emotionally disabled, person with an emotional disability
Cognitive Disability	Retard, mentally retarded, “special ed,” dumb,	Cognitively/developmentally disabled, person with a developmental disability
Short Stature, Little Person	Dwarf, midget	Someone of short stature, little person
Health Conditions	Victim, someone “stricken with” a disability (i.e. “someone stricken with cancer” or “an AIDS victim”)	Survivor, someone “living with” a specific disability (i.e. “someone living with cancer or AIDS”)

HELPFUL HINTS

When talking about places with accommodations for people with disabilities, use the term “accessible” rather than “disabled” or “handicapped.” For example, refer to an “accessible” parking space rather than a “disabled” or “handicapped” parking space or an “accessible” bathroom stall rather than a “handicapped” bathroom stall.

Refer to a person’s disability only when it is related to what you are talking about. For example, don’t refer to people in general or generic terms such as “the girl in the wheelchair” since the wheelchair has nothing to do with the conversation you are having.

PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

A common trend and courtesy when talking about individuals with a disability is to use people-first language. The purpose of people-first language is to promote the idea that someone’s disability is secondary. It is not the defining characteristic of the entire individual. To use people-first language, one would refer to the individual first, then to their disability when it is relevant and appropriate. For example, say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.” Some people, however, refer to themselves using disability-first language. For instance, one might say, “I am a blind person.” We always respect the language choices of people when we are directly quoting them.

When in doubt, use the formula below as a way to speak about the individual and their disability:

Name or Title of a Person	+	Verb	+	Assistive Device or Disability
Customer, individual, professor, student, child, applicant, etc.		Has, uses, utilizes, etc.		Wheelchair, low vision, developmental delay, etc.

Many guides on disability language and etiquette may likely emphasize using person-first language, except perhaps, when discussing certain disability cultural groups that explicitly describe themselves with disability-first language. While it is generally safe to use people-first language, there are members of certain disability groups in the United States who prefer not to use it, such as the American Deaf community and a number of Autistic people/Autistics. The basic reason behind members of these groups’ dislike for the application of people-first language to themselves is that they consider their disabilities to be inseparable parts of who they are. Using people-first language, some also argue, makes the disability into something negative, which can and should be separated from the person.

As mentioned throughout this resource, if you are in doubt, please feel free to ask the person about whom you are speaking.



Working with People with a Disability:

WHEN GUIDING SOMEONE WHO IS BLIND OR WHO HAS LOW VISION:

- Offer the use of your arm (at or around the elbow), walking normally. Don't take their arm as this can be invasive. Most often an individual who is blind would rather take your arm.
- Consider the accessibility of a building when walking or navigating a space. Be mindful of the route you are guiding them through or directions you might give them when walking on their own.
- Give specific, non-visual directions. The words "here" and "there" are too general for descriptive use. Be specific and label objects that give direction and location.
- Orient an individual by using numbers on the face of the clock. Straight ahead would be 12, directly to the right would be 3, directly to the left would be 9, etc.
- Describe the layout of large rooms. A brief description of how the furniture is arranged can make it easier for that person to navigate their surroundings. Generally, an in-depth description is not needed. A description such as, "the room is set up in a classroom style" or "there is a low coffee table in front of the couch" will work.
- If you come to a door, mention how it opens (in or out, left or right).
- Indicate the direction of stairs (up or down) and if they are wide or narrow. If there is a handrail, it is often useful for individuals living with blindness or low vision to access the rail for additional guidance. Additionally, you don't need to tell the person how many stairs there are, as this can be confusing. Simply when to step up or down and use of the handrail is enough.
- When showing a person who is blind to a chair, guide them to the back of the chair. They will be able to navigate the rest.
- When dining out, offer to read the menu, including prices, if no braille menu is available.

SERVICE ANIMALS:

Some people may use a service animal to assist them with daily living. Here are some tips on interacting with an individual and their service animals:

- Don't distract, feed or pet the animal. These animals are working, and by distracting them you could be putting them in a situation that is detrimental to their owner.
- Even if the animal is at rest, be sure to ask the owner's permission to interact with the animal.
- Respect the handler's wishes. If they tell you something you should or should not do when interacting with their service animals, comply with their requests.
- Do not speak to the service animal when they are on duty. This can be distracting to the service animal, and they need to be alert to take commands from their handler. Instead, speak to the handler about any instructions or information.
- If you are guiding or walking with someone who has a service animal, walk on the opposite side of the service animal.

- Don't say the animal's name or feel like you have to introduce it. Saying its name can be distracting.

WHEN SPEAKING WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS BLIND OR WHO HAS LOW VISION:

- Identify yourself by name when initiating a conversation. You should not assume the person will recognize your voice. Just as you would identify yourself when you make a phone call, it is helpful to identify yourself when speaking to someone who is blind or who has low vision. Similarly, when with a group, it's often helpful to go around the room and have everyone state their names so the individual who knows who is in the room.
- Don't use hand signals. They may not be helpful to the person with whom you are speaking.
- Speak directly to the person. Do not speak to a family member or friend instead and ignore the person who is blind. Remember they can speak for themselves.
- Do not censor your language when speaking to individuals with disabilities. It's perfectly okay to use words like watch, look and see when talking. People living with blindness or low vision know these words are part of normal conversations.
- Feel free to talk about visual entertainment, such as sports, television and movies.
- Give verbal indication when you walk away from a conversation or leave the room. If the individual to whom you are speaking can't see you, they may not know you walked away. A quick word that you need to leave will eliminate any awkward moments.

WHEN CREATING AN EVENT OR WORKING WITH AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS BLIND OR WHO HAS LOW VISION:

- Do not be afraid to ask questions. If you're curious about the technology a person is using or if you would want to know what they can or can't see, don't be afraid to ask. Most people would rather have you ask questions than make assumptions.
- Provide electronic copies of material you'll be handing out in hard-copy form or presenting via PowerPoint prior to a meeting. This gives staff with disabilities the opportunity to load the documents onto their computer or other device and print them in an accessible format or listen to them in auditory format. Providing copies ahead of time is a necessary component to the meeting.
- Try to avoid highly stylized typefaces. When preparing documents, avoid using stylized or graphical fonts, as these can be difficult for individuals with low vision to read. Instead, use easy-to-read, sans-serif fonts with clearly defined letters and clear spacing between the letters, such as Helvetica, Verdana or Arial.
- Add alternative text tags to graphics. If you insert a graphic or photograph into your PowerPoint presentation, Word document or web page, add alternative text tags which briefly describe the image. Depending on the software you're using, this can usually be done by right-clicking on the graphic and choosing "properties."
- Not all people who are blind or who have low vision use braille. Consider presenting information in alternative formats.



REMEMBER:

DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS - People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make decisions for them. Depending on the situation, it could be a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations. For example, if you offer assistance and the individual declines, then it is important to respect their decision as they know what is best for themselves.

RESPOND GRACIOUSLY TO REQUESTS - When people who have disabilities ask for an accommodation, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough to ask for what they need.

DO GOOD - When you meet someone who is living with blindness or low vision, be yourself, use common sense and do good.



References

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