



National Disability Coordination Officer Program  
AN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE



# Communicating effectively with people with disabilities

Many people feel uncomfortable communicating with people with disabilities. They may:

- be unsure of the correct terminology to use
- be **worried about offending** the person with a disability
- be **unfamiliar** with appropriate communication strategies
- have had a **previous difficult experience**

This Information Sheet aims to provide some **practical advice and helpful tips** to help you feel more confident communicating with people with disability.

## Positive vs. Negative language

	
Person with a disability	disabled/deaf/blind/crippled/ retarded person
Person who uses a wheelchair	confined/victim/sufferer/ restricted/wheelchair bound
Person with a mental illness	crazy/nuts/psycho
Person who is successful	brave/heroic/inspirational
Accessible parking, bathroom	disabled parking, bathroom
Person without a disability	normal person

## General tips for communicating with people with disability

- **Relax** - People with disability are just people
- Speak to people with disability as a **person first**
- **Speak to adults with disability as adults**
- **Don't make assumptions about a person's disability:**
  - e.g. don't assume a person using a wheelchair is paralysed
- Don't make assumptions about what a person with disability can or can't do
- **If a person has one disability don't assume they have another**
  - e.g. don't yell at a person who has a vision impairment; or
  - e.g. don't assume a person with a speech impairment has an intellectual disability.
- **Ask before you help** and respect a person's right to refuse your help. People with a disability have their own way of doing things.
- **Take the time to listen to people with a disability** – you may learn a lot. If you can't understand what a person is saying **don't pretend** – just ask them again.
- **Always speak directly to the person with a disability.** If the person is with a carer or interpreter do not direct your conversation at them.

## Tips for communicating with people with learning disabilities

- Use short, clear and direct sentences
- Rephrase information if it is not understood, or present it differently
- Consider using visual aids like diagrams or pictures
- Always provide opportunity to answer any questions

## Tips for communicating with people with autism spectrum disorders

- Avoid using humour, sarcasm, figures of speech or colloquialisms
- Use simple and short sentences and closed questions
- Be aware that body language may not be understood
- Use words that are flexible – “we may” NOT “we will”

## Tips for communicating with people with physical disability

- Do not shout, speak more slowly or over exaggerate
- Make eye contact and speak directly to the person with a disability
- Where possible, sit down to speak with a person using a wheelchair so that you are at the same eye level
- Don't hang onto a person's wheelchair or tray – the chair is part of their personal space

- If a person also has a speech impairment:
  - Don't assume they can't understand your speech
  - Be patient, don't try to finish their sentences
  - Ask questions that only require short answers
  - Ask them to repeat themselves if you don't understand - don't pretend to understand

### **Tips for communicating with people with chronic medical conditions**

- Often you may not know a person has a medical condition and won't need to communicate any differently
- If a person is showing signs of distress or being unwell:
  - Remain calm and keep your voice tone unhurried
  - Ask the person if you can do anything to help
  - Help the person access support and tell them what you are doing

### **Tips for communicating with people with a mental illness**

- Often you may not even know a person has a mental illness and won't need to communicate any differently
- If a person is showing signs of agitation, anxiety, panic, fear, disorientation or aggressiveness:
  - Remain calm and keep your voice tone unhurried
  - Make time and allow the person to talk
  - Show empathy without necessarily agreeing with what is being said eg. "I understand that you are feeling frightened by your experiences..."
  - Accept that hallucinations and delusions are real for the person with disability – but do not pretend they are real to you.
  - Use clearer, short sentences
  - Help the person access support and tell them what you are doing

### **Tips for communicating with people with an intellectual disability**

- Use your natural volume and tone and speak clearly using plain English
- Check understanding by asking the person to repeat what you have said in their own words Rephrase information if it is not understood, or present it differently
- Ask short questions to gather information
- Make instructions clear and brief and try not to get frustrated if you have to repeat yourself

## Tips for communicating with people with vision impairment

- Introduce yourself by name, even if you already know the person
- Use your natural voice – don't shout or over-exaggerate
- Tell the person when you are leaving the room
- Be specific with any verbal directions or instructions e.g. "slightly to your right" not "over there"
- Don't presume that the person can't see anything – if appropriate it's ok to ask them what they can see
- Don't be embarrassed if you use phrases like "see you later" or "did you see..."
- Don't pat a guide dog in its harness as you may distract it from working

## Tips for communicating with people with hearing impairment

- Place yourself where they can see you to gain attention, or lightly touch their shoulder
- Position yourself to ensure maximum light on your face
- Always face the person – do not turn away or cover your mouth
- Don't provide unnecessary detail – keep sentences short
- If necessary use a pen and paper to communicate
- Be flexible – if a person doesn't understand something you say, reword it instead of repeating it
- Don't be embarrassed if you use phrases like "did you hear about..."



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### Sources

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