A disability is a physical or mental impairment that restricts a person's daily activity. We all experience disability at some point in our lives through problems such as depression, insomnia or even a broken leg. For people with permanent or long-term disabilities, however, it is a more significant factor. While people with disabilities are not defined by impairment, it does play a role in shaping their lifestyles.

Most people with disabilities are limited in only some ways, not all. They can, and do, participate in all aspects of life, including work, play, romance and parenting.

**Understanding Disability**
Disability occurs in people of all backgrounds, gender and age. In the United States, people with disabilities comprise the largest minority group: about 20 percent. Disabilities can occur from birth or as a result of disease or injury.

When meeting persons with disabilities, some people are uncomfortable and feel sorry for them, assuming that they have a poor quality of life. This common stereotype can discourage social interactions and the development of true relationships. Reasons for this unease about disability include psychological and cultural influences, as well as emotional reactions (fear, disgust and pity). Fear of the unknown is also common. This can lead to assumptions, stereotyping and prejudice. Even the most well-intentioned person may feel awkward and avoid people with disabilities out of self-consciousness or fear of failure. For example, an individual may think, “Since I don't know what to say or how to act, I'll just look the other way and avoid saying hello.”

Those with disabilities do not want pity nor do they want to be unduly glorified for “courageously” coping with everyday life. People with disabilities experience a positive quality of life to the same degree as other people. People with disabilities want to be treated with respect and as equals with their non-disabled peers.

When meeting people with disabilities, the best thing is to be open – willing to learn and make no assumptions. Do not assume that all people who use wheelchairs cannot walk, for instance, or that someone with a cane needs help at a street crossing. People with disabilities are as varied as social situations.

People with disabilities have the full range of personality traits. Disability is not a measure of character. If you have questions about a disability, ask – within polite boundaries and if your
question is relevant to the conversation. People with disabilities, like everyone, would rather dwell on their strengths than weaknesses.

**Building a User–Friendly World**
In addition to other people’s discomfort and fear, people with disabilities cope with other barriers that can complicate everyday living. Grocery stores, parking facilities and public transportation systems, for example, are often designed in ways that make routine errands difficult. These guidelines can help create a friendlier environment:

If you think someone needs help, ask how to be of assistance, and then follow the person's instructions. It is always okay to ask, but not okay to assume. Once you ask, do not move until your offer is accepted.

When meeting someone with a disability, be sure the location is accessible (including parking lots and bathrooms). For people with mobility limitations, ask if they require any accommodations, such as elevators or ramps. If you suspect a problem, change the site or let the person know ahead of time.

Always speak to the person you are addressing, not to a companion or interpreter. Do not worry about using expressions that could be interpreted as disability–related puns, such as “Got to run” or “See what I mean?” These are part of our common language and are not offensive.

**People with Wheelchairs**
Wheelchairs are a source of freedom and mobility for people who cannot walk or have difficulty with movement or endurance. Wheelchairs help people get where they need to go. People are not “wheelchair–bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.”

- A wheelchair is part of an individual's personal space. Respect that space. It is not polite to touch or lean on a wheelchair without the user's permission.

- Always ask before you move a person in a wheelchair – out of courtesy, but also to prevent disturbing the person's balance.

- If a person transfers from a wheelchair to a car, chair, bathtub, toilet, etc., be sure not to move the chair beyond easy reach.

- Always make sure that a chair is locked before helping a person transfer.

- When conversing at length with a person in a wheelchair, try to sit or place yourself at eye–level.

**People with Speech and Language Impairments**
Speech and language disabilities can range from slight mispronunciations such as a lisp to total loss of speech and language. Be patient when communicating with a person with a speech and language disorder. Do not finish sentences, although rephrasing or repeating words to verify understanding is acceptable.
• Treat the person as an adult – do not “talk down.” The issue is one of communication, not intelligence.

• A quiet environment is optimal so keep background noise to a minimum.

• Familiarize yourself with, and encourage the use of any alternate or augmentative communication system that the person may have such as talking devices, alphabet boards or high-tech computer applications.

• Use facial expressions, gestures, writing and drawing to reinforce verbal messages.

• Speak somewhat more slowly, using short simple sentences to promote understanding. Do not yell.

• If you have difficulty understanding, ask for multiple repeats. Never pretend to understand if you do not.

**People with Visual Impairments**

There are many degrees of visual impairment. White canes with red tips are used both by people who have low vision and those who are totally blind.

• Always announce yourself and introduce anyone with you. Before trying to shake hands, say something such as “I'd like to shake your hand.”

• Inform the person who is visually impaired when you are leaving.

• If you think someone needs help, ask first by saying something such as “Would you like assistance?”

• If requested, offer your arm as a guide (do not take the person's arm) and inform the person of obstacles such as curbs or steps.

• When offering a seat, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the chair.

• When dining, help orient the person to the table setting.

• Not all people with vision impairments read Braille. Some read large print, use tape recorders or other special equipment.

• Do not pet or speak to a guide dog. Dogs are at work, even when sleeping.

**People who are Deaf or Hard-of–Hearing**

Hearing impairments are sometimes referred to as “hidden disabilities” because of a lack of obvious signs. There are different types and degrees of hearing loss. For some people, hearing loss may be present from birth; for others, it may be acquired gradually over time.
• Hearing loss is not related to intelligence.

• Hearing aids may be only partially effective. Even when amplified, sounds may seem distorted to someone with hearing loss.

• Turn down, or off, background noise or music.

• Engage the person's attention before speaking – touch lightly, wave, or use another physical sign.

• Speak clearly, from a close proximity. Yelling or exaggerating will not increase understanding.

• Face the person and speak directly. Do not speak to an interpreter, if one is present. Avoid covering your mouth, chewing, smiling or smoking when speaking.

• Make sure that difficult information, such as names, addresses and phone numbers, are understood by asking the person to repeat the information. It is also acceptable to write things down.

• People who have been deaf or hearing impaired from birth or an early age may be difficult to understand and may need to communicate by sign language or other gestures. American Sign Language (ASL) is the most common, but there are many different “Signed English” systems in use, especially by children.

**People with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities**
People with developmental disabilities (historically referred to as mental retardation) are often confused with having a mental illness, which accounts for most of the misunderstanding that surrounds this disability. Very few of all people with developmental disabilities have profound intellectual impairment. About 85 percent can read, write, drive, think and lead productive, independent lives. People with developmental disabilities are responsible, industrious and reliable – or not – to the same degree as everyone else.

**Disability–Sensitive Language**
Most people with disabilities prefer the term “person with a disability,” which recognizes an individual's innate personhood before the disability. This is called “people first” language. Avoid the terms below when referring to people with disabilities. They are inaccurate, offensive and insulting and they perpetuate the stereotype of “otherness.”

**Avoid using these terms:**
afflicted with or by
blind as a bat
defect / defective
deformed
disabled
cripple, crip, crippled, crippling
group home
handicap/handicapped
homebound
invalid
normal (as the opposite of having a disability)
pitiful
poor, unfortunate
stricken
victim
wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair

Respectful terms include:
survived
sustained
living with
person with a disability
non-disabled or able-bodied
uses a wheelchair, uses an assistive device
person with a physical disability
person who is deaf or hard of hearing
has difficulty speaking, has a speech disability
person who is blind or has low vision
person with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability

The following glossary may help clear up some other language issues:

**ADA:** Americans with Disabilities Act, signed in 1990, is the first comprehensive civil rights legislation to protect people with disabilities.

**Able-bodied:** What people with disabilities call the non-disabled; a neutral term

**Blind:** Having no vision. Low vision: Having partial sight.

**Cerebral palsy:** Neurological condition occurring before, during or right after birth resulting in difficulties of coordination, movement and/or speech.

**Communicative disorder:** Term for speech, language and/or hearing impairments.

**Deaf:** Lacking the ability to hear.

**Independent Living:** A movement among people with disabilities to enhance self esteem, self determination and socio-economic resources available to choose and maintain individual, independent lifestyles.

**Learning disability:** A disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding
or using spoken or written language that may affect a person's ability to think, listen, read, write, spell or do math.

**Paralysis:** Paraplegia is paralysis of the lower half of the body including the partial or total loss of function of both legs. Quadriplegia is paralysis involving partial or total loss of function in both arms and legs. Hemiplegia is full or partial paralysis of one side of the body.

**Rehabilitation:** Program of medical and clinical treatment designed to maximize residual physical, perceptual and cognitive abilities following a disability.

Related Resources

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