



## **Medical Providers and the Americans with Disabilities Act**

### **Part 5: Disability Etiquette**

The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities and requires medical providers to make their services accessible. Negative, patronizing, and prejudicial attitudes are the most frequent barrier individuals with disabilities face. A full understanding of the ADA is not complete without an understanding of appropriate disability etiquette and how etiquette implies attitudes.

First, consider your use of language. The term “handicapped” is outdated and is offensive to most people with disabilities. Instead of referring to “handicapped” parking, call it accessible parking. Likewise, the term “mentally retarded” is extremely offensive. This term has now developed in our language into a derogatory insult. Instead, use the term intellectual disability or developmental disability.

Avoid negative, disempowering words to describe a person’s disability, such as “suffering from” or “a victim of”. Also, people who use wheelchairs are not “wheelchair bound”. Their wheelchairs give them freedom to participate in life just like everyone else.

People First Language refers to the practice of putting the person before the disability. For example, instead of saying “disabled person”, “person with a disability” is preferred. Likewise, instead of saying “epileptic”, “person with epilepsy” is preferred. The thought behind this is that people with disabilities are people first. Their disability is not the most important thing about them. People with disabilities have active lives with careers, spouses and children and they own homes and have hobbies, just like everyone else. When making conversation with a person with a disability, avoid making their disability the main topic of conversation. Instead, talk about the same things you do with everyone else. Set aside the disability and focus on the person. Refrain from viewing an individual with a disability as either a victim or as a hero. People with disabilities are not heroes simply because they are engaging in everyday life.

Be aware that within every disability category, there are differing levels of functioning. Few people are totally blind but many have varying degrees of vision loss. Likewise, some people who use wheelchairs have total paralysis, others have some movement and others are able to walk a short distance. Often people with the same diagnosis have very different symptoms. Don’t make assumptions about needs, abilities, or limitations. Be responsive to the individual.

As such, some people with disabilities will want and appreciate help while others need no help at all. Be respectful of those differing needs and respect an individual's right to independence. Always ask before helping, respect the individual's answer even if it is different than you would anticipate, and listen to instructions. Allow the person with the disability to guide you in how to provide appropriate assistance and remember that what works for one person might not work for another.

Don't touch mobility aids unless you've asked for and received permission. A person's mobility aid is considered to be part of their personal space. If you attempt to push a person who is using a wheelchair without first asking for permission, you may actually hurt them. If their brakes are on or their hands or feet are positioned wrong, injury may result.

Always treat adults with disabilities as adults. They are most often competent, independent, capable adults who manage their own lives. Speak directly to the person with a disability, not to their companion, aide or sign language interpreter. Even a patient with an intellectual disability is entitled to the opportunity to converse directly with you.

For individuals who are blind or have low vision, verbally identify yourself when you approach and don't leave without letting them know. Indicate where they may leave their clothing and personal affects and don't move these without letting them know. Orient your patient to the layout of your office with a verbal description including doors, steps, ramps and emergency exits.

For patients who have a hearing loss, do not talk to them from a distance or from another room. Face them while speaking and make sure they can see your mouth. Avoid shouting, exaggerating mouth movements and rapid talk, but instead speak clearly in a normal tone of voice. Also be sure to minimize background noise and glare.

For additional information on disability etiquette and on the ADA, please contact the Rocky Mountain ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232.