



Recreational Sports

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY

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# Disability Etiquette Handbook

*Moving Beyond Accessibility: Creating an Inclusive and  
Welcoming Environment*

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## Introduction

Recreational Sports Department at University of California Berkeley is committed to creating a positive inclusive environment in all its services, programs and facilities. The purpose of this handbook is to support this initiative as training material for staff in disability etiquette.

The lack of awareness about disabilities can lead to unintended stereotypes and discrimination. Access to programs and facilities starts with good customer service! The following tips reflect generally accepted protocol and language. Customers with disabilities, when treated as valued customers, will share information on the accessibility of the programs and facilities.

## Definitions

### The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Provides comprehensive civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities in all aspects of life, from housing, education and public services to transportation.

- Equal access to facilities and services: physical access and information through “effective communication.”
- Equal opportunity
- Integrated rather than separate facilities

*The ADA is a Civil Rights Law*





## Disability

A person with a disability under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act & ADA is defined as:

- a person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; or
- a person with a record of such a physical or mental impairment; or
- a person who is regarded as having a physical or mental impairment.

## Accessible

Refers to a site, facility, work environment, service, or program that is easy to approach, enter, operate, participate in, and/or use safely and with dignity by a person with a disability.

## Accommodation

Any change in the service environment or in the way things are customarily done that enables an individual with a disability to enjoy equal service opportunities

- Services
- Equipment
- Assistive Technology
- Change in policy/procedure to allow access for a person with a disability

## Inclusion

The active, intentional, and ongoing engagement of diversity, where each person is valued, respected and supported for his or her distinctive skills, experiences and perspectives, to create an environment where everyone has an opportunity to experience personal fulfillment and participate fully

**At its simplest is 'the state of being included'.** It is a **universal human right** whose aim is to embrace all people, irrespective of race, gender, disability or other attribute, which can be perceived as different.





## About Disability

*Disability is the one diversity category that crosses gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age and socioeconomic class.*

**People with disabilities are like everyone else.** They are people first and have the same hopes, dreams, fears, hobbies, jobs and interests as the rest of the community. The disability is not what a person identifies with the most; it is just a part of the whole self, like being left handed or having red hair.

Disability can be inherited or acquired as a result of accident, injury or age. **Disability can happen at any time, to anyone!**

**Some disabilities are visible and some are not.** Someone who uses a cane or a wheelchair obviously has a disability. However, many disabilities are “hidden” such as learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities and some physical disabilities. Epilepsy, cancer, arthritis and heart conditions are some examples of “hidden” physical disabilities. People tend to believe these are not disabilities, but they are. Although the disabilities are not visible, these individuals are legitimately affected in their major life activities.

A disability is not a negative characteristic and should not be portrayed as such.

**Disability is diverse as the community we live in.** So, when speaking about or to people with disabilities, focus on abilities and individual qualities. Portray them as they are in real life – humans! Make reference to the person first.

Don't patronize nor idolize individuals with disabilities. They are people living their daily lives just like everyone else.

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## Effective Communication

We all communicate in various ways with or without a disability. Although there may be a few specific communication strategies to keep in mind when assisting a person with a disability, good communication skills can be applied to all service situations, and should be used with all consumers. Pay attention to cues from the person you are communicating with.

### The Power of Words

***Words are powerful!*** Our language shapes our attitudes and our attitudes shape our language. And our ***words have a profound effect on other people.***

***Words lead to actions.*** Good words lead to good actions. By using words or labels that devalue someone, it makes it easier to discriminate. Sadly, this has historically happened to people with disabilities. Many old labels focus on the disability, what's different about that person, what someone can't do. But, we can change that.

Using "Person First" Language puts the person first, Not the disability! It allows us to focus on what we have in common and our strengths instead of what is different. It isn't that disability isn't a part of that person's life... it's just that it doesn't have to be the one and only defining aspect of their personality.

**The Golden Rule:** If you are ever unsure of: acceptable language, acceptable etiquette, or anything else: It is OK to Ask. To be unaware and courteous is understandable, and often invited. To make assumptions is unacceptable

### What are the ADA requirement for customer service?

- **Remove barriers**
- Provide **auxiliary aids and services** for effective communication
- Reasonably **modify policies, practices, or procedures**
- Ensure there are **no unnecessary eligibility criteria**



## Remove barriers

**Barriers:** Obstacles that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in society, they could be physical or attitudinal.

**Physical Barriers:** obstacles that hinder people with physical disabilities from gaining access.

**Attitudinal Barriers:** fears and assumptions that prevent people with and without disabilities from meaningfully interacting with one another.



**Stereotyping:** assuming that people with a disability quality of life is poor or that they are unhealthy because of their impairments.

**Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination:** Within society, these attitudes may come from people's ideas related to disability—People may see disability as a personal tragedy, as something that needs to be cured or prevented, as a punishment for wrongdoing, or as an indication of the lack of ability to behave as expected in society.

**To creating a welcoming environment:** two main elements of inclusive culture are required to ensure equal access and full participation: **Attitude and Commitment** The attitude and behaviors of others can be the most difficult barriers for people with disabilities to overcome



## The Basics

### Offering assistance

All customers are individuals. Persons with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes with diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs, and preferences--- just like every other customer.

The best way to learn how to accommodate customers with disabilities is to ask them directly.

Just because someone has a disability, don't assume s/he needs help. If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine.

Always direct communication to the person with a disability. Unsure what to do?

**Ask!** Make a mistake? Apologize, correct, learn and move on.

Treat adults as adults. **Relax!**


#### **Respond graciously to requests.**

When people who have a disability ask for an accommodation, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough in the facility to ask for what they need. And if they get a positive response, they will probably come back again and tell others about the good service they received.

Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people.

Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it.

A person with a disability will oftentimes communicate when s/he needs help. If s/he does want help, **ask** how before you act.

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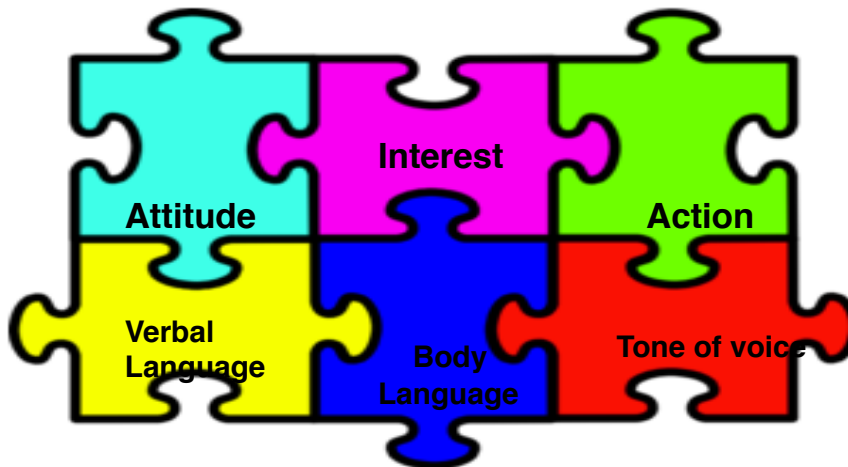
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**Relax.** Don't make assumptions based on appearance alone. The best resource for information is the person, so Ask!

Maintain natural language and tone when interacting with people whom have disabilities.

Professional behaviors such as active listening, a service-minded orientation, and a results-focus work equally well with people with disabilities as with all other people. Remember the core pieces of excellent customer service.

## Core pieces of customer service!







## Disability Etiquette Tips

### Meet and Greet

**JUST LIKE YOU:** Treat people with disabilities just like anyone else.

**SMILE:** Remember to smile. Smiles are important during the meeting and greeting process.

**MAKE EYE CONTACT:** Making eye contact is fundamental to both you and the person with a disability. Even with people who are blind, they can hear where your voice is coming from and know if you are directly facing them.

**SHAKE HANDS:** If the person cannot shake your hand they will tell you. **Do not be ashamed of your attempt**, however you could gently touch that individual on their arm during an introduction while smiling, speaking and looking directly at the person. Shake hands with a person who has a prosthetic hand or arm. Shake a prosthetic hand as you would do with anyone else. When meeting a person who is blind, you could say "I would like to shake your hand" in order to offer an auditory cue. Shake hands with your left hand with someone that does not have a right hand.

**WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY:** If someone who experiences hearing loss requires sign language and no sign language interpreter is present, offer your business card and find paper and pen and write down what you would like to say. Reinforce what you say by directly facing the person in case they can lip read.

**PLACEMENT OF AN INTERPRETER:** A person who uses a sign language interpreter should be the one to request where the interpreter sits or stands. If you are introduced to someone who uses a sign language interpreter speak directly to the person with hearing loss as you move your eyes and face in the direction of that person. Your facial expressions, gestures and expressions of animation and the intensity of your speech are important and will be noted by the person to whom you are speaking..

**MEETING A PERSON WHO IS BLIND OR HAS LOW VISION:** Identify yourself and those that may have accompanied you. Inform the person if you must leave and end the conversation. If offering assistance do not grab their cane. Ask if they would like assistance, wait for a response and state, "Would you like to take my arm?". Never assume they can't see you – many people who have low vision still have some sight.



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**UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND:** People with disabilities want you to hear, understand, and respond to them when they request assistance or when they are in a conversation with you. In order to understand a request for assistance or, what is being shared during a conversation, feel comfortable to state “I am unable to understand what you are saying, could you repeat what you have just said?” or “Let us move out to the other room where it is quieter.” Ask the person what it is that they need in order for you to provide assistance if appropriate. Being honest makes you an effective communicator.

**SPEECH IMPAIRMENT:** Do not act as if you understand what is being shared in a conversation with someone who has speech impairment when you do not understand. Inform the person you do not understand and try again. Do not finish the sentence or talk for someone that has speech impairment. **Be patient.** Communication preferences for people with hearing loss may also be preferred by people who have speech impairments.

**COSMETIC DISFIGUREMENT:** When meeting a person with a cosmetic disfigurement, continue eye contact and act as you would with anyone else. People with cosmetic disfigurements are covered by the ADA and included in the regulatory definition of impairment.

**ACCENTS:** If you have an accent it may be difficult for people who experience hearing loss to understand what you are saying. Be prepared to repeat what you say and possibly if requested spell a specific word that is not well understood.

**COCHLEAR IMPLANT:** If someone has a cochlear implant, they are able to hear and learn to interpret speech and other sounds but depending upon the success of the implant and how long it has been since the implant was inserted and, for some, the progress they have made in speech and sound rehabilitation, they may still need to lip read or use a sign language interpreter. Speak in a normal tone while directly facing the person and enunciate the words you speak as you would with anyone else. Do not increase the volume of your voice or slow down your speech (unless requested), or, exaggerate lip movements.

**SIGNIFICANT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY:** When meeting someone who may have a significant intellectual disability do what you would do when meeting anyone else but in your own assessment of the interaction, you may want to use shorter sentences and potentially easier to understand words.

**AUTISM SPECTRUM:** When meeting someone with an autism spectrum disability you may not be aware of the disability. People with Asperger Syndrome do not necessarily have language deficits but could have challenges interacting in some social situations or in a professional context.





**SIT DOWN & RELAX:** For longer conversations with a person who uses a wheelchair or, someone who does not stand for long periods of time, pull up a chair and sit down in order to conduct a conversation while at eye contact level.

*It is okay to feel nervous or uncomfortable around people with disabilities, and it is okay to admit that. It's only human to feel that way at first. Everyone is uncomfortable in situations they are not familiar with. When you encounter these situations, think "person first" instead of disability; you will eventually relax.*

## General Guidelines when...

### Interacting with a Person with a Physical Disability

- Never use a person's disability to improve another individual's perspective on life.
- Make sure your workout site is accessible.
- Ask ahead of time if the person will need any accommodations.
- Speak to the person the same way you would speak to a person without a disability. No need to crouch or kneel to the level of the individual if your interaction will be brief.
- Get to know your clients level of function. Just because they use a wheelchair doesn't mean that they can't stand or wouldn't choose to transfer out of it.
- Offer your client choices whenever appropriate but never over adapt.
- Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's wheelchair unless the person asks you to. The wheelchair is part of his/her personal space.

### Interacting with a Person with a Sensory Disability

- Always verbally introduce and excuse yourself when you join or leave a conversation with an individual who is visually impaired.
- Be specific when describing the location of objects.
- If an individual has difficulty speaking, do not assume they have an intellectual disability or alter your own speech or attitude.
- Allow sufficient time for communication, do not attempt to finish their sentence or provide words before they can say them.
- If a person has hearing loss, let them take the lead in establishing the communication mode, such as lip-reading, sign language, or writing notes.



## Interacting with a Person with an Intellectual Disability

- Keep the workout space small and preferably well known to the individuals. (For example a workout done in a large gym may be overwhelming)
- They may easily lose focus or get off task. It may be beneficial to keep a visible schedule or list of things you will be doing that day.
- It may help to allow them access to a preferred location or object during the interview. For example they may prefer one specific piece of exercise equipment you can use that piece as a reward when they complete something you have asked them to do.
- Ask one question at a time. Explain new activities one step at a time. Make sure they understand what you have said before you move on. Don't allow them to just say yes they understand.
- Keep communication simple. Rephrase comments or questions as needed, using different words the second or third time, to clarify.
- Allow the person time to tell or show you what he or she wants.

## When Working with an Athlete with a Disability

- Treat the athlete the same as an athlete without a disability.
- Have a basic understanding of the sport and any equipment used for the sport. (and if you don't know –just ask.
- Understand the different levels and types of disability sport competition.

## Remember

Our own beliefs and comfort level regarding disabilities have a major impact on how we view, interact, and provide services to individuals with disabilities.

The “Botton line”

**When you meet a  
person with a disability,  
THINK: CUSTOMER!**



## Appropriate Language

### Do Say

- Person with a disability/who is disabled, person with reduced mobility
- Little person, little people
- Non-disabled, able-bodied
- Uses wheelchair, uses assistive device
- Birth injury, congenital disability
- Person with a physical disability
- Person who is deaf/hard of hearing
- Has a speech disability
- Person who is blind/has low vision
- Person with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability
- Person living with epilepsy/seizure disability
- Person with a psychiatric disability

### Don't Say

- The disabled, handicapped, invalid, physically challenged
- Midget, dwarf
- Normal, healthy
- Wheelchair bound, confined to wheelchair
- Birth defect, deformity, deformed
- Crippled, lame, deformed, invalid, gimp
- The deaf, hearing impaired, deaf mute
- Has a speech defect, dumb
- The blind, blind people, visually impaired
- Stupid, retard, retarded, slow, subnormal, mentally challenged
- Epileptic, has fits, spastic
- Crazy, nuts, loony

Use "People First" terminology such as *person who is blind* or *people with disabilities* since this acknowledges them as people first rather than their disability.

Avoid referring to groups of people by their condition or disability such as *the blind* or *the deaf*, or the **“ADA person.”**

Avoid sensational descriptive words when referring to a person's disability such as *suffers from*, *is a victim of*, or *is afflicted with*.

Use *disabled*, *disability* or *accessible* rather than *handicapped*.

Avoid condescending euphemisms such as *differently abled*, *physically challenged*, *mentally different* or *handicapable*.”



## References

National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)  
<http://www.nchpad.org/1491/6439/Disability~Etiquette>

American with Disabilities Act  
[www.justice.gov](http://www.justice.gov)  
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<https://www.ada.gov/business.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Communicating With and About People with Disabilities  
[https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter\\_photos.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf)

American Association on Health and Disability. Disability etiquette best practice  
<http://www.aahd.us/best-practice/disability-etiquette-how-to-interact-with-people-who-have-disabilities/>

Reaching out to customers with disabilities: communicating with customers who have disabilities  
<https://www.ada.gov/reachingout/lesson24.htm>

Person First Language  
[www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

Disability Awareness  
<http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/awareness/etiquette.php>