

# Communication Tips by Specific Disability

## Physical disabilities

Some people with physical disabilities may use a wheelchair, scooter, cane, crutch, walker, or brace to improve mobility. It is important to remember that not all people with physical disabilities require the same assistance.

Tips for interacting with a person with a physical disability:

- A wheelchair is part of a person's body space; do not lean on it.
- Speak directly to the individual, not to the person assisting him or her.
- Interact with the person at eye level. If need be, sit down.
- Be aware of the distance between you and the individual, as he or she may have difficulty hearing you.
- Offering help is never the wrong thing to do, but make sure it is provided in an unobtrusive manner.
- Follow through on whatever needs to be done. Do not make a premature exit when assisting someone.

## Speech Impairment

A person may have a speech impairment for a variety of reasons. It is important to remember that speech impairment is not an indicator of an individual's intelligence level. Also keep in mind that a person with a speech impairment does not necessarily have a hearing disability.

Tips for interacting with a person with a speech impairment:

- Be patient and unhurried when talking to the individual; understand that the conversation may not move along rapidly.
- Make eye contact.
- Use the same tone of voice and volume that you would normally use unless the person asks differently.
- Do not try to finish the person's sentences, rather be patient so the person can complete his or her thoughts.
- Ask questions that require a short answer or a nod or shake of the head.
- If you do not understand, ask the person to repeat the statement.
- Listen to the person's words, not to the manner in which they are said.
- Respect that a person with a speech impairment may prefer one-on-one conversation to group discussion.
- Ask the person how to best communicate instead of guessing.

## **Visual Impairment**

Having a visual impairment does not necessarily mean that a person has no ability to see. In fact, most individuals who are blind have some degree of sight. Also note that although people who are blind may depend more on their sense of hearing than some, they do not innately have a heightened ability to hear.

Tips for interacting with a person with a visual impairment:

- Do not assume that a person needs your help, rather ask if they would like help.
- When providing assistance, offer simple information about the surrounding area in order to help familiarize the person with the location.
- Follow through on what needs to be done when helping an individual with a visual impairment; do not make a premature exit.
- When greeting a person, feel free to shake his or her hand after saying, "How do you do? Let me shake your hand."
- When speaking with a person who is visually impaired, identify yourself by name.
- Address people by name during a conversation so they know you are speaking to them.
- Speak in a normal tone and speed of voice.
- Answer all questions verbally instead of with nods, gestures, or other body language.
- Direct your conversation to the person with the vision impairment, not to another person or helper who may be with them.
- In order to gain the attention of a person with a visual impairment, touch the individual lightly on the arm as you speak.
- Do not feel awkward giving written information to a person with a visual impairment; he or she can always ask for assistance reading it.
- Let the person know when you are leaving his or her company.

*Reprinted from NISH's Disability Awareness Manual.*