

COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES

Who are customers on campus?

Universities have all kinds of customers, including full-time and part-time undergrad and graduate students, city residents, visiting alumni and faculty, students' parents and other relatives, and representatives from other organizations, e.g., universities, ministry, business partners.

What kinds of disabilities are there?

Disabilities can be both visible and non-visible: while some disabilities are immediately recognizable, others are not.

When you interact and communicate with persons with disabilities:

- Be respectful.
- Dismiss your stereotypes and avoid making assumptions about a person's disability or capabilities. Many persons with disabilities often talk about being frustrated with people assuming what they can or can't do.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability and not their support person, companion or interpreter. While this can sometimes be challenging, ignoring or talking over the person with the disability is patronizing and an affront to their dignity.
- Be patient – sometimes communicating with someone with a disability can take a bit longer, requiring you or the other person to repeat yourselves several times.
- Avoid touching or interacting with a service animal.
- Think of the assistive device as an extension of the person's personal space – touch these only if you are asked to.
- When you don't know what to do, it's always best to ask the person with a disability.

Learning Disabilities

The term "learning disability" describes a range of information processing disorders that can affect how a person acquires, organizes, expresses, retain and understands verbal and non-verbal information. Examples include **dyslexia** (difficulty understanding written words), **dyscalculia** (difficulty solving arithmetic problems and grasping math concepts) and **auditory or visual processing disorders** (difficulty understanding language despite normal hearing and vision).

When communicating and interacting with someone with a learning disability:

- Speak naturally, clearly and directly to the person.
- Provide information in a way that works best for that person. For example, even if you have written notes, it may be helpful to verbalize the information too. If you are not sure, gently ask the person if there's a different way you can provide the information that would be helpful.
- Be patient and willing to explain something again.
- Extra time to complete a task is often helpful. As some students with dyslexia may take longer to read and understand written words, it is often helpful when they have extra time to complete an in-class activity.

Mental Health Disabilities

Mental health disabilities are usually not visible. Most of the time, you will not know that a person has a mental health disability. Sometimes, a mental health disability may present itself through "odd" or very different behaviour although again, you may have no way of knowing for sure.

Mental health disabilities cover a wide range of disorders and include depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic attacks and dissociative disorder.

When communicating and interacting with someone you know who has a mental health disability:

- Treat the person with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be patient. A person with a mental health disability may have difficulty concentrating, mood swings, poor memory and lack of motivation.
- In situations where you think the person needs additional help, be patient and calm.
- Familiarize yourself with any protocols in place at your university for dealing with crisis situations involving mental health disabilities.
- Make an effort to learn about resources available at your university and in the community for assisting people with mental health disabilities.

Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

Intellectual or developmental disabilities are those characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviours, which are required in many everyday social and practical skills. Some people with intellectual or development disabilities learn and process information more slowly and may have difficulty with abstract concepts and subtleties of interpersonal interactions.

When communicating and interacting with someone with an intellectual or development disability:

- Remind yourself to be patient.
- Speak more slowly and leave pauses for the person to process your words.
- Use plain language and avoid jargon.
- Speak directly to the person.
- Ask one question at a time, giving the person time to formulate and give their reply.
- Make sure the person understands what you've said. You can be direct and ask, "Do you understand this?"

Hearing Loss

Many terms are used for hearing loss; here are a few commonly used terms:

- A person who is **hard of hearing** has a mild to profound hearing loss.
- A person who is **deafened** has a significant hearing loss and may have lost their hearing gradually or suddenly.
- People who are deafened or hard of hearing may use devices such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, FM systems or they may rely on speech-reading (also known as lip reading).
- A person who is **deaf** has little or no functional hearing and may depend upon visual rather than auditory communication.
- **Oral deaf** refers to a person who is deaf and whose preferred mode of communication is verbal and auditory. The person may or may not use sign language.
- **Deaf** spelled with a capital D is used to refer to people who are deaf or hard of hearing and who identify with the culture, society and language of Deaf people, which is based on Sign Language. Their preferred mode of communication is Sign.

When communicating or interacting with someone with hearing loss:

- If the person isn't looking at you, attract their attention before speaking with a discreet wave of your hand or a gentle tap on the shoulder.
- Speak clearly, pacing your speech and pauses normally. You don't have to shout, exaggerate or over-pronounce your words.
- If possible, find a quiet place to converse – background noise can be hard to filter out.
- Don't stand in front of a window or light as it shades your face – poor light and shadows can make it difficult to speech read.
- Don't put your hands, glasses or other objects such as a pen, in front of your face when speaking. This too can make speech reading difficult.
- If interacting with a person with an interpreter, be sure to face and speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- If necessary, ask the person for suggestion on how to improve the communication. He or she may ask you to move away from the light, speak a little more slowly or perhaps even use a pen and paper.

Vision Loss

Vision loss reduces a person's ability to see clearly. Few people with vision loss are totally blind. Some have limited vision, such as the loss of side, peripheral or central vision. Some can see the outline of objects, while others can see the direction of light.

When communicating and interacting with someone with a vision loss:

- Don't assume the person cannot see you – few people with vision loss are totally blind.
- Do not touch the person without permission.
- When offering to guide someone with a vision loss, stand on the side they direct you and hold out your elbow. When they've taken it, walk at a normal pace and the person will usually walk a step behind. Announce handrails, doors (e.g., to the left, right, push/pull to open) and describe the surrounding areas.
- Do not leave the person in the middle of a room. Show him or her to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- If you need to leave the person, let them know you are leaving and will be back.
- Identify yourself when you approach the person and speak directly to him or her, not to his or her companion.
- Don't raise your voice. Say your name even if you know the person well, since many voices sound similar.
- Give clear and precise directions. For example, "a metre to your left" is better than "over there".
- If you're not sure how to give directions, ask the person what would be most helpful.
- Don't be afraid or embarrassed to use words such as "see", "read" or "look". People with vision loss also use these words.
- Do not touch or speak to service animals. They are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- When giving printed information, offer to read, summarize or describe it.

Deafblind

Most people who are deafblind have a combination of vision and hearing loss. They usually have some useful but not always reliable vision and hearing. People who are deafblind use many different ways to communicate including sign language, tactile sign language, tracking, tactile fingerspelling, Braille, speech and speech reading.

When communicating and interacting with a person who is deafblind:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deafblind may have some hearing and/or vision.
- If you are not sure how to begin, ask the person what will be helpful.
- Many people will explain what you need to do, perhaps giving you an assistance card or note explaining how to communicate.
- Often people who are deafblind are accompanied by an intervenor. Again, speak directly to the person with a disability and not the intervenor.
- Identify yourself both to the person with the disability and the intervenor.
- Some people who are deafblind use service animals. Again, do not pet or interact with the animal.
- You can give a gentle touch on the arm to get the person's attention. However, do not touch a person who is deafblind on the shoulder or back as they may not have enough vision to orient your location to them.
- Suddenly touching a person who is deafblind can be alarming and should only be done in emergencies.

Speech or Language Disabilities

A person with a **speech disability** is unable to produce speech sounds correctly or fluently, sometime due to voice strength or aphasia. Some people with speech disabilities have difficulties with articulation and stuttering.

A person with a **language disability** has trouble understanding others (receptive language) or sharing thoughts, ideas and feelings (expressive language).

When communicating and interacting with someone with a speech or language impairment:

- Don't assume that because a person has one disability, he or she also has another. Many people with speech disabilities complain that because they can't speak well, people treat them like they unintelligent or developmentally delayed.
- Remember that anxiety can often aggravate a speech disability – your being relaxed will help reduce the other person's anxiety.
- Be patient and allow the person to complete what they are saying without interruptions.
- If the individual is accompanied by a support person, follow the same guidelines as when an interpreter is present. Speak to and look at the person with the disability and not the support person.
- If you don't understand, ask the person to repeat the information. Sometimes it is helpful to use "yes" or "no" questions.
- Some people with speech disabilities use a communication board, symbols or cards to help them communicate. When asked, use these devices as instructed.

Physical Disabilities

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities – not all require a wheelchair. People who have arthritis, heart or lung conditions or temporary disabilities may have difficulty with moving, standing or sitting. In many cases, it may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

When communicating and interacting with someone with a physical disability:

- When meeting a person using a wheelchair or walker, do offer to shake their hand, even if they appear to have limited use of their arms. This common action of personal contact creates a warm environment for communication.
- If the person uses a wheelchair and the conversation is expected to last longer than few moments, find somewhere to sit down nearby. This enables you to make eye contact on the same level and reduces neck strain for the person having to look up at you.
- Don't make assumptions about a person's capabilities. Some people can walk with assistance but use a wheelchair or scooter to conserve energy or move around quickly.
- Remember that the person's assistive device is part of his or her personal space. Don't lean or rest your foot on the wheelchair, walker or other equipment.
- Don't move items or equipment, such as canes or walkers, out of the person's reach.
- Don't move a person's wheelchair without permission – moving them without warning can cause the person to lose their balance.
- If the person is accompanied by a support person or companion, speak to the person directly. It is annoying and frustrating not to be included in a conversation that involves you.
- Familiarize yourself with the location of accessible features located nearby, such as accessible entrances, washrooms, elevators and lifts. Although a student who uses a walker, for example, may be familiar with some parts of campus, he or she may still ask a faculty or staff member the location of the nearest accessible washroom.
- When hosting or planning an event, let attendees know about the location of these features beforehand, for example in event posters or other announcements.

Other Disabilities

Chronic health conditions, such as asthma, arthritis, diabetes, lupus, sickle cell anemia and hemophilia, are disabilities that may affect a person's ability to move around, sit or stand or to do other things. Many people don't think of these health conditions as disabilities requiring accessibility considerations but in some cases, they do. You will probably not know that someone has a disability. Since universities have no way of identifying all of the persons with disabilities who may use its services, university employees should think more frequently and naturally about accessibility in their activities, services and interactions.

Alternate formats

Alternate formats are simply ways of providing information in ways other than it was originally produced.

Why are alternate formats important for persons with disabilities?

Persons with disabilities receive, convey and make use of information in a wide variety of ways.

- Some persons with disabilities may not be able to read print but can access the information using other formats such as audio, Braille, enlarged text and screen-reading software.
- Although we often think of people with vision loss needing alternative-to-print formats, many people with learning disabilities also benefit from having access to information in other formats. For example, some people with auditory processing difficulties prefer written rather than spoken information.
- Closed captioning, CART (communication access real-time translation), sign language and text are all different types of alternate formats that people with hearing loss use to access information.
- Some people with physical disabilities (such as low upper body strength) may find it easier to access information using audio formats as the effort to hold a book or sheaf of papers can be quickly tiring.