

Handout: Tips and Techniques to Provide a Welcoming Environment for People with Disabilities

General Suggestions

- Remember, everyone is an individual, so while these are recommendations for positive interactions, they may not work well with everyone. If the individual with the disability reacts negatively, apologize and ask what would be the most appropriate way of communicating with him/her.
- Ask, “May I assist you?” or “How can I best assist you?” Even before you ask the question, ask yourself: Does the person look as though they need help? When you inquire, don’t assume that they do – listen for their response.
- Common courtesy and common sense are always appropriate.
- Every disability has a broad range and a spectrum of severity. A mobility impairment can be visible through the use of a wheelchair, crutches, or cane. However, with some mobility issues there may be times where the person is using a wheelchair and other times when the person can walk without assistance.
- Disabilities can be visible or invisible. Invisible disabilities include cardiac issues, hearing loss, epilepsy, and psychiatric disorders.
- When planning an event, add a note about wanting to accommodate for accessibility needs with a direct number to a real person to contact. That opens the door for an individual to reach out and not feel like they are imposing.
- Simply talk to a person and ask what they can and cannot do.
- Always assume there is a person with a hidden disability in a group. So always say “Rise in spirit and/or body,” and always plan quick stretch breaks every 30-45 minutes.
- Invite partial participation, and ask what you can do to make participation possible.
- When you use the term “PC”, think of it as meaning “personally conscious” rather than politically correct.
- People’s abilities typically vary, even with a similar disability. For example, you will not know how long the person has had the disability, whether they have worked through the mourning process, or if it is a newly acquired condition.

- Ask if someone needs help – don't assume that they do, then listen for a response.
- **Micro-inequities** refer to the ways that people may be ignored, disrespected, undermined, or somehow treated in a negative way because of their disability or some other intrinsic characteristic. A micro-inequity can be very small. It can involve an action, or words, or a tone of voice, or a gesture. The inequity can be a deliberate attempt to harm someone or it can be unintentional, rooted in a person's perceptions about others. Whatever the source and however minor each separate event, over time the "cumulative effect" of these little incidents, words, or gestures on an individual with a disability can cause the person to act out, become depressed, or feel hyper-sensitive.

Visual Impairment and Blindness

- Sited guide technique allows the person who is visually impaired to take the elbow of the sighted person in order to assist the person to a destination. Do not hold the blind person's arm so that he/she is in front of you when walking. Let the person hold your arm. This will let him/her walk slightly behind you, and the motion of your body will tell him/her what to expect. Offer verbal cues as to what is ahead when you approach steps, curbs, escalators, or doors.
- Giving directions, by saying "over there" or pointing, is not normally useful. Be more specific. For example say, "The elevator is about five steps in front of you at 2 o'clock".
- Remember: when you are facing someone, their left is your right.
- When describing things in front of a blind person, use the clock face as an analogy. For example, "Your glass is at 1 o'clock, the beans are at 7, and the chicken is at 4."
- Use correct guide dog procedures. Do not interact with the service dog unless the handler first gives you permission.
- When writing on a white board or showing a PowerPoint slide, speak as you write so everyone in the audience can be included.
- Provide materials in accessible formats to persons with low vision or blindness (e.g., Braille, large print, digital, or email attachment).
- Ensure that printed materials are available in large print (16 point) and that the font is easy to read; for example, Arial font is often preferred, because the letters are a block print, with no added embellishments on the letters.
- Speak directly to a person, not through an intermediary. Use a natural conversational volume and tone.
- When you are greeting a person who is blind or visually impaired, use their name and don't forget to identify yourself. For example, "Hi Sam, it's Joe. I work here."
- When the person with a visual impairment enters a room, be sure to greet the individual, using your own name (as above).
- It is really okay to say things like, "See you soon." Feel comfortable using everyday words relating to vision like "look," "see," and "watching TV."

- During a conversation, give verbal feedback to show you are listening. They may not be able to see the expression on your face but they will know you're listening.
- Do not take over tasks for people that they would normally do for themselves. First ask if they need help, then offer to assist, and be guided by the person's response to your offer.
- If you see someone about to encounter a dangerous situation, be calm and clear about your warning. For example, if someone is about to bump into a pole, calmly and clearly call out, "Wait there for a moment; there is a pole in front of you."
- When you leave a room, say you are leaving. Never leave a person who is totally blind or severely visually impaired in an open area. Instead, lead them to the side of a room, to a chair, or to some landmark.
- Describe things pictorially. Explain as though you are describing something to a person over the phone. Use color and simile; such as the ball is the size of an orange or a basketball. The comparisons should use familiar objects; for example, "It is the length of your forearm."
- Some people have "night blindness" and can't see well enough to drive at night. When planning meetings in the evening, consider providing alternate transportation for them.

Hard of Hearing and Deaf

- Get the person's attention before speaking. Gently tap the Deaf/hard of hearing individual on the arm or elbow and make sure they are looking at you.
- Be close to the person or the interpreter for best visibility.
- Don't face the white board or display screen while speaking.
- If the person has an interpreter, talk to the person directly, not the interpreter.
- Do not cover your mouth or chew gum when speaking.
- Speak a little more slowly and distinctly, rather than loudly.
- Lighting should not be from behind the speaker as it casts shadows on the face.
- The speaker should project his or her voice.
- Speak in short sentences.
- Rephrase thoughts if the person is having difficulty understanding you. Many words look similar on the lips – for instance, for fifty and fifteen, use 1 5 and 5 0; use “automobile” rather than “car” for greater clarity.
- Keep paper and pen nearby or use an electronic device. If communication is difficult, feel comfortable writing key words or brief phrases – writing down phone numbers or addresses is often a good idea.

Hard of Hearing

- Don't shout—it won't help! Hearing aids increase the quality of sound. Loudness distorts the sound.
- In loud or crowded places, a person who is hard of hearing has to concentrate more carefully. If in a loud environment, such as restaurant, it can be very tiring. Find a less noisy area where sound is minimized.

Intellectual Disabilities

- Focus on the individual. Everyone has his/her own strengths.
- Pace presentations as needed, and slow down if necessary.
- Wait longer for a response. Don't over assist, or be patronizing. .
- Connect the information with previous knowledge whenever possible.
- Preview key points and summarize at the end to enhance comprehension.
- Use as many modalities as possible. Show a picture, and describe it verbally. Use Universal Design (see **Error! Reference source not found.**)
- Provide a great deal of interaction; interact with the person when possible to keep the attention of the individual on the subject at hand.
- Use simple sentences, not baby talk – and speak in a normal tone of voice. Don't use complex words when simple words will do. Talk to the person as a person; talk to adults as adults, not as children.
- Find commonalities to talk about – TV shows, movies, pets, jobs, church events, and families.
- Make instructions clear and concise. Don't combine too many steps into one instruction. Have each instruction be just one step.
- Talk with the person even though they may not be verbal enough to respond. If they cannot respond, at the very least introduce yourself, tell them who you are, and that you are pleased to meet them. Shake hands, if appropriate.
- Give clear, nonjudgmental feedback when behavior is not appropriate. If you are unsure about how to respond or handle a situation, ask your minister, Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry Committee, or a family member. Be nonjudgmental and patient.
- Be generous, but appropriate, with compliments when behavior is appropriate—or when the person has accomplished a task, or taken initiative.
- When behavior is not appropriate, don't ignore it. Provide corrective feedback.

Physical Disabilities

- Do not touch a wheelchair without permission. It is part of the person, so touching it is similar to invading personal space. Respect this boundary by not leaning on someone's wheelchair.
- Ask if and how you can help in buffet lines.
- When in a wheelchair, the person is always forced to look up at whoever he/she is speaking to. If possible, grab a chair or crouch down to speak if you intend to have a conversation.
- Utilize wide aisles (refer to ADA guidelines) whenever possible. If you are moving toward the end of a corridor, make sure there is adequate space for the person in the chair to turn. Scooters are longer and narrower than chairs. Take this into consideration.
- If the mobility impairment allows the person to walk, make sure there is plenty of seating nearby. If there is an elevator versus stairs, ask for their preference. If possible, provide benches with a rail on each side so that people can push themselves up from a sitting position.
- Ask how you can best help when assisting a wheelchair user to go up or down a curb, or when holding a door.
- Move crutches, walkers, canes, or wheelchairs only with the permission of the user.
- Return the devices as soon as possible to their original spot.
- Allow children to ask questions and allow the person being questioned to answer. Some people may not wish to engage in this type of discussion.
- Ask "May I help?" when wanting to be helpful. And if given permission to do so, ask, "How may I help?" Unsolicited assistance is often seen as rude and intrusive.
- Some people with mobility issues have problems with balance. Offer to assist the person when he/she is putting on a coat, but ask the best way to do so. Similarly, if you grab to help open a door, the person may be balancing on it, so speak before you assist and wait for a reply.
- People who use wheelchairs are "wheelchair users," not "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound."

- Grasp the push handles tightly so that the chair does not go too fast when helping to guide a wheelchair user down an incline.
- When assisting a wheelchair user go up or down a step, tilt the wheelchair back at all times while descending or ascending the stairs.
- Learn the location of wheelchair-accessible ramps, restrooms, elevators, doors, water fountains, and telephones.

Learning Disabilities

Typically, individuals with learning disabilities (LD) have average to above average intellect, so you do not need to “dumb down” communications with these individuals. In fact, most individuals with learning disabilities, or dyslexia have acquired a variety of compensatory strategies for working around their learning challenges.

The following suggestions may be helpful to consider when interacting with individuals with LD:

- Whenever possible, present information using a multi-modal format. When you say something of importance, or give directions, it can be helpful to also write out the information.
- Some individuals with learning disabilities process print more slowly. Be sensitive that they may not want to read aloud in front of others or under timed conditions.
- Websites need to be clear and easy to read. Avoid visual clutter and extraneous wording. If you use PDFs or graphics, be sure they are accessible to screen-reading software, as some individuals with LDs use technologies to assist with reading.
- When presenting new information, provide listeners with a framework. Let them know what you are going to discuss, speak directly to the content, and summarize at the end. A written outline for the learner to follow may also be helpful.
- It is always a good idea to monitor the listeners’ comprehension and ask them if they understand what was read, discussed, or presented, so there are no misperceptions.
- If you sense an individual is struggling with reading or writing, ask them what accommodations might be helpful so they can retain the information. Simply ask what works best.
- Some individuals with learning disabilities have difficulties with reading nonverbal messages and body language. Information may be interpreted too literally.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome

- People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may not show emotions; therefore, facial expressions are not a reliable indicator of internal feelings.
- People may not respond in a neurotypical way. If the person is an adult, use adult language. A person with ASD may not indicate a response or show emotion when spoken to. Facial expressions are not a reliable indicator of internal feelings.
- Use a normal tone of voice, and don't speak louder than usual. Don't speak to an adult as if he/she is a child.
- Sensory input may be enhanced or diminished. Consider, for instance, fluorescent lighting, which individuals with ASD can often hear and find distracting. If possible, change lighting in meeting rooms and other spaces. Consider having lights dimmed when possible.
- Similarly, audio feedback from microphones or speakers can be very painful, so check microphones and sound equipment in advance to make sure they do not hum or whine.
- Another distracting sensory input can be scents. Use unscented candles, and ask congregants to avoid wearing perfumes or other products that can be irritating to persons with allergies or ASD.
- The taste sense is also heightened for many people who have ASD. Don't question someone's eating habits. Such questioning can make people feel uncomfortable.
- Find a quiet area in your building for a child who is beginning to experience sensory overload. Busy areas with many people can be unsettling. Once calm, the child may be able to rejoin the group after some time has elapsed.
- When having a conversation with a person with an ASD, it is best to describe things by concrete examples. Metaphors in particular can be difficult for them to understand.
- Words do not always come easily. Allow the person to process information as needed and slow down conversations.
- When someone with ASD is over-stimulated and or excited, they may make repetitive gestures or motions, or fidget with objects. This is referred as "stimming." Don't interfere unless the person is physically hurting themselves.

- Everyone communicates in some way. People with ASD may not be verbal and may use pictures, sign language, or electronic devices to communicate. Learn how they communicate best, and keep trying.
- If the person with ASD is experiencing over-stimulation, he or she may need to be relocated to a quieter environment. Do not touch the person or interfere; most prefer being left to themselves until they are ready to rejoin the group. Again, this situation may be embarrassing for the individual.
- Ask people with ASD if they would like to participate, and if so, ask what way suits them best.
- Face recognition is often difficult, so repeat your name when approaching a person with ASD and use name tags whenever possible.

Speech Impairments

Speech difficulties arise from many sources. Cerebral palsy and stroke are examples.

- When talking with someone who has a profound speech impairment, keep in mind that they know they have a problem with oral communication. If you think you understand some or all of the words and phrases, repeat them back to the person who can then indicate if you are correct
- Ask if you don't understand; don't fake it.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Do not speak "for" the individual, or attempt to finish her or his sentences.
- Exchange handwritten notes when possible and when that would help.
- Some people with profound speech impairments may have difficulty with manual dexterity, and may use a communication board or an electronic audio voice.
- Ask the person's permission to use a companion as an interpreter. Continue speaking to the person, not the interpreter
- Many nonverbal individuals have normal intelligence but may not be able to express themselves well.

Chemical Sensitivities

- Choose personal products that are fragrance-free. Be aware that there are hidden, long-lasting fragrances in many cleaning products.
- Use only unscented soap in restrooms, and carefully wrap and dispose of chemical air “fresheners.”
- Designate fragrance-free seating sections for church and community events.
- Designate smoking areas away from buildings so people don’t have to pass through smoke when entering or exiting, or have smoke waft in through doorways or windows.
- Adopt a policy of using fragrance-free cleaning products.
- Provide adequate ventilation; clean furnace filters frequently.
- Unscented beeswax candles are often well-tolerated by people with sensitivities. Use them as an alternative to scented or paraffin candles.
- Learn what an individual is sensitive/allergic to and make accommodations respectfully.

Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems manifest in many ways. Common symptoms include depression and anxiety. Some people also experience delusions and paranoia with or without hearing voices. Your interactions with an individual with mental health problems may be different on different days depending on how they are feeling, since the symptoms often come and go.

- Be willing to listen without judgment. Their experience of the world may not be the same as yours in any given moment.
- Sometimes mental health problems make it difficult for someone to participate in group activities consistently. Don't assume that they are not just as committed as others if they cannot attend all events.
- Don't laugh or mock someone who is talking to voices that you cannot hear. Treat them with respect and honor their experience.
- If a person is angry, don't take it personally, and don't approach or touch the person without his or her request or permission. Sometimes the best way to resolve a conflict is to stop the discussion and resume it later.
- Be genuine; like anyone else, a person with mental illness can pick up on a false or demeaning approach.
- Try to understand what is being said from the person's perspective; be comfortable even if you feel this person's mind is working in a way that is different from yours.
- Stay calm, keep eye contact, and retain a calm facial expression and body manner. What is most important is to communicate that you care.
- Use sentences and words that are short, simple, and uncomplicated. If something you say is not understood, repeat the message, using other words.
- Be a good listener. Don't criticize, lecture, or argue. Try to be supportive. Treat the person with respect.
- If the person is willing or indicates a need, offer to get the help of a friend, relative, clergy, or qualified professional.
- Focus on the person's strengths and what has been accomplished, and treat the person and his/her accomplishments in a positive way.

- Note that some psychiatric medications have side effects, including facial tics and shakiness.
- Structure limits, behaviors, and responses in an appropriate way. Ask for advice about how to handle limit-setting. In a nonjudgmental and confidential way, ask your minister, Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry Committee, or caring/pastoral care committee.

Invisible Disabilities

- Don't refuse to believe what you cannot see by doubting a person's truthfulness.
- People do not like to always have to identify themselves as a person with a disability. When planning an event, add a note about wanting to accommodate accessibility needs with a direct number to a real person to contact. That information opens the door for anyone to reach out and not feel like they are imposing.
- The best tactic is to simply talk to a person and ask what they can and cannot do.
- Always assume there is a person with a hidden disability in a group. So always say "Rise if you are willing and able," and always plan quick stretch breaks every 30-45 minutes.
- If a person says they cannot do something, don't try to coax or cajole or convince them to try anyway.
- Invite partial participation, and ask what you can do to make participation possible.
- A hearing impairment is a hidden disability; always assume there is a person in your group with hearing loss, so face your audience.
- Don't judge another person's pain or limitations; accept as true what the person tells you.