

## **TAKING THE HANDICAP OUT OF DISABILITY**

In recent years, much attention has been given to the rights of people with disabilities. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and efforts of many consumer groups have spurred ramp construction, affirmative action to increase employment opportunities and television programming to include realistic role portrayals for people with disabilities.

These developments, resulting from the recognition that people with disabilities are, indeed, valuable and equal members of society, have helped people with disabilities lead more productive lives.

However, many people still view individuals with disabilities as lesser people- to be pitied, feared or ignored. These attitudes may arise from fear of someone who is different in any way or simply from lack of knowledge about disabilities. Despite good intentions and education programs, negative stereotypes remain.

This article gives suggestions on how to relate to people with disabilities, how to look beyond the disability and look at the ability and the personality- the things that make each of us unique and worthwhile.

### **ATTITUDES AND BARRIERS**

A person with a disability is, first and foremost, a person. While a particular disability may limit certain types of activities or abilities, it does not make the individual any less a person. Ten to fifteen percent of the population has a disability such as blindness, deafness, paralysis, cerebral palsy, neurological disorder, mental illness, arthritis or mental retardation.

An attitude is a feeling or emotion which a person has towards a fact, situation, or person. Awareness is the knowledge or perception about a situation, object or person. Attitudinal barriers are a way of thinking or feeling that blocks or limits people's perception of the potential of people with disabilities to be capable, independent individuals.

Positive attitudes and awareness help people in their contacts and relationships with people with disabilities. Attitudes which are insensitive and prejudicial produce poor relationships. A person may not be aware of biases or negative attitudes and may express them in words or actions.

### **COMMUNICATION: THE TWO WAY STREET**

If you are not used to communicating with a person with a disability and have any hesitations or concerns, here are a few tips:

**USE COMMON SENSE-** People with disabilities want to be treated the same way as everyone else.

**BE POLITE-** Show the person the same respect that you would expect to be given to you.

**OFFER ASSISTANCE-** Do not hesitate to offer assistance. However, do not automatically give help unless the person clearly needs help or asks for it. If the person declines your offer, do not insist on helping. Ask the person if assistance is needed and how it should be given.

## **HELPFUL HINTS**

While the following list is not inclusive of all disabilities, it does give some tips to use when meeting people with some common disabilities. Each person's particular disability may vary in how it affects them compared to how it affects another person. Sometimes a person may have more than one disability. While the following hints may be useful when applied and general, each person is affected by a disability in an individual way.

## **HEARING IMPAIRMENTS**

A person's failure to respond to a spoken request or warning may be the result of an inability to hear. Gestures and guttural sounds made by a person with deafness and or hearing impairments are not signs of anger, belligerence or intoxication. They may be the individual's only method of communication. However, many individuals with hearing impairments have very clear speech.

When communicating with a person with a hearing impairment:

- Be considerate and try to make the person feel comfortable and confident in dealing with you.
- Look directly at the person to whom you are speaking. Speak slowly- the person may wish to lip read. If a sign language interpreter is present, talk directly to the person with the deafness- not the interpreter.
- Be flexible with your language. If a word is not understood, try another word rather than simply repeating yourself.
- Be aware of false interpretations (a nod of the head does not necessarily mean "I understand").
- Do not shout. Hearing aids make sounds louder, not clearer.
- Use of sign language, miming and gesturing, etc....., is encouraged in augmenting lip reading abilities. Even minimal sign language skills can make lip reading easier.
- If all fails, use a pad and pencil to communicate.

## **BLINDNESS OR VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS**

People with blindness or visual impairments rely on their other senses to perceive the world around them. When you are with a person with blindness or a visual impairment:

- Speak directly to the person using a normal tone of voice. Blindness does not affect a person's hearing.
- Do not be afraid to use terms such as "See you soon." Everyday words relating to vision are used by people with blindness themselves.
- Offer assistance but be guided by the individual's response.
- Be specific in giving directions. It is useless to point or give visual landmarks. If the individual must make a turn, state whether it should be left or right.
- Walk alongside and slightly ahead of a person with blindness or visual impairment when you are assisting.
- Never hold the person's arm while walking. Let him or her hold your arm. The motion of your body tells the person what to expect.
- Avoid escalators or revolving doors, if possible. These can be disconcerting and dangerous.
- Assist the individual on stairs by guiding a hand to the banister. If there is no banisters tell them whether you are going up or down and when you are at the end of the staircase landing.
- When giving assistance in seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat.
- Never leave a person with blindness in an open area. Instead, lead the person to the side of a room, to a chair or some landmark from which you or another person can provide them a direction for travel.

- Do not leave a person with blindness abruptly after talking, without saying you are leaving. Otherwise he or she may try to continue the conversation with you when no one is listening or present.
- Do not pet a guide dog. The dog has an important job to do and petting may be distracting.

### **MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS**

Individuals use wheelchairs, crutches, or leg braces as a result of a variety of disabilities including spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, cerebral palsy or polio. Wheelchairs provide mobility for persons with paralysis, muscle weakness, lack of coordination, nerve damage and stiffness of joints. When you are with a person using a wheelchair:

- Talk directly to the person using the wheelchair, rather than to someone else. People using wheelchairs are fully capable of speaking for themselves.
- Push a wheelchair only after asking the person if assistance is needed.
- When assisting someone using a wheelchair to go up or down a curb, ask if the person prefers to go forward or backward.
- In guiding a wheelchair down an incline, hold the push handles so that the chair does not go too fast.
- Learn the location of the wheelchair-accessible ramps, restrooms, elevators, and telephones.
- For more than one step, keep the chair tilted back at all times while descending or ascending.

### **MENTAL ILLNESS**

People with mental illness are people whose emotional or mental abilities to cope with life are impaired. Mental illness is not the same as mental retardation. Most people with a psychological disability are on medications to help them cope with life and it is not obvious that they have such a disability. Some others have cycles of stability and then periods when it is difficult for them to function. If you come in contact with someone who is having a mental or emotional crisis:

- Ask if anything is the matter and offer to talk.
- Refer to Career and Counseling Services or The Community Counseling Clinic on campus.
- Do not call the police or an ambulance unless there is a clear indication that the person is potentially harmful to others or to him/herself.

### **EPILEPSY**

Epilepsy is a hidden disability and is a disorder of the nervous system. Seizures are a primary characteristic of epilepsy, but they can often be controlled or prevented by the use of medication. Most seizures last only a few minutes and many individuals receive enough of a warning to avoid falling or other injury. If an individual has a seizure:

- Keep calm. You can not stop a seizure once it has started. Do not restrain the person.
- Clear the area of hard, sharp or hot objects which could injure the person. Place a pillow or rolled-up coat under the person's head.
- Keep crowds away.
- Do not force anything between the teeth.
- Remember the person does not breathe well and the skin color may be affected.
- After the seizure, the person may be confused and should not be left alone.
- Medical help may be needed only if breathing stops; the person continues to have seizures one after another or becomes seriously injured.

