

Five Mistakes Not to Make When Working With People with Disabilities

*and Five Tips for Having More Fun**

1. Don't Assume. Ask.

Just like every other human, people with disabilities are individuals with their own personalities, skills, and choices for fun. Don't assume we can't do anything. Ask, ask, ask. For example, deaf people navigate city streets, people without arms make world class art, people who can't talk write brilliant academic papers. There's a tradition of blind audio editors and hosts. Most all of us use computers and, yes, we are all sexual beings.

2. Don't Equate Mental Disability with Anger and Violence.

Ask for Advice about Your Own Mental/Emotional Challenges

Contrary to public perception, people living with mental and emotional disabilities are much more likely to be victims rather than the perpetrators of violence. Most of us have learned to cope with emotional storms and/or bouts of unreality. Our coping skills are something important that we can bring to U.S. culture and progressive circles. Take advantage of it by asking for help for yourself and your friends.

3. Don't Use Outmoded, Goody-Goody or Degrading Words.

Ask What Words We Use.

You probably know that “retard” and “midget jokes” are insults, but just in case... “Handicapped” and “invalid” is a sign you haven't updated your dictionary since 1950. You will hear “wheelchair bound” in newspapers and NPR, but most find wheelchair use a benefit, not a limitation. The best term is “wheelchair user.” Plueese... forget “differently abled.” Some of us use “gimp” and “crip” as a term of pride, but check before you drop these in an attempt to be cool. When I have a guest I ask, “May I tell our listeners about your disability? How should I describe it? What kind of accommodation do you need?”

4. Don't Give Medical Advice or Make Comparisons with Others You Know.

The one assumption that's almost always safe to make is that the disabled person knows more than anyone else about their body, including their doctors. They have likely tried numerous alternative routines and remedies as well as being well versed in the standard Western medicine treatments. If you have a similar problem, ask them for advice. When you talk to someone with a disability, you will likely be reminded of something that happened to a relative or friend. It's probably not a good conversation opener. We hear way too often about people who we don't know and who have only a passing resemblance to our lives. It's boring. Just try to have the conversation you would have with anyone – “How do you like to spend your time?” usually works pretty good.

5. Don't Allow Your Fear to Cheat You.

Most of us have our social hesitation. We don't know if we can figure out how to talk to someone who uses an alphabet board, can't hear, or don't give us the usual social cues because they can't see. We're afraid to make a mistake. We don't want to be embarrassed. It's okay. Be Courageous and Patient. Try a few things. Speak in your usual tone and pace. If that doesn't work, slow down, use gestures. Just try to make a connection. Look for a glint of humor around the eyes and mouth. Disabled people know how to make fun happen easier than most.

6. (Bonus Tip) Don't Think Making the Accommodations Will be Too Hard

When I ask, "What kind of accommodation do you need," we begin a straight-forward exchange of information. Even people with very serious disabilities spend most of their lives in a world that doesn't adjust to them. They usually have a variety of ways to work around problems that arrive. "Accessible Bathroom" means that it fits a set of basic standards, but small businesses (and small radio stations) don't always have it right. People's needs vary. If you have some grab bars and the doorway isn't tiny, ask to see if your bathroom might work. Deaf people know the cheapest interpreters. Some wheelchair users can walk a few steps, even negotiate stairs. Back to that basic tip: Ask.

**Caveat: These tips are written for radio hosts who interview people with disabilities and managers who are training disabled people in radio skills. If you have a public event which brings in a large group of people, the rules are stricter. Please consult your local disability center and, in a pinch, call me.*

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