Visual Impairments

If you are guiding someone, let him/her take your arm just above the elbow and guide rather than lead or propel the person. Give him/her clear instructions, such as “this is a step up” as opposed to “this is a step.”

Ask if any particular assistance is needed.

Do not presume that the person can’t see anything.

Orientation the person to the area, explaining where major furniture is located. If the person has been there before, you should inform him/her of any changes or new obstacles.

When seating a person, put their hand on the back of their chair, and they will then be able to seat themselves.

When giving directions, use specific words such as “straight ahead” or “forward.” Refer to locations of people or objects in terms of clock hands: “The chair is at your 2:00.”

When preparing printed information for a person with low vision, it is best to seek their advice for their preferred format. General information for people with low vision should be provided in Arial 18 point bold.

Avoid revolving doors on stairs or on escalators, put the person’s hand on the railing.

To Prevent Accidents
Keep doors fully open or closed.

Communication Issues

Many people feel uncomfortable around individuals with disabilities. Much of this discomfort stems from lack of personal contact with people with disabilities and a sense of awkwardness and uncertainty as to how to speak and act in their presence.

The following sections offer suggestions for increasing effective communication and reducing anxiety when interacting with people with specific disabilities.

Hearing Impairments

Find out how the person wants to communicate with you. She/he may want to use his/her own amplifier or communication device, lip-read, use an interpreter, or request that you write down what you are saying.

Face the person directly and speak at a normal volume and rate.

Do not cover your mouth or look away while you are talking.

Rephrase sentences rather than repeat them.

Do not make assumptions about a person’s ability to communicate or the way in which she/he does it.

Communicate in writing, if necessary.

Use a well-lit, glare-free area when interacting with people who prefer lip reading.

When a sign language interpreter is present, omit phrases like “please tell him/her that...” and address the person directly while the interpreter signs.

Enhancing Your Interactions

With Persons With Disabilities

Resources


Chapter 3 specifically details the use of use “nonhandicapping” language.


The guidelines provide suggestions on ways psychologists can make their practices more accessible and disability-sensitive and on how they might enhance their working relationships with clients with disabilities.


This latest edition portrays a genuine perspective on life with disabilities. The book improves on the fourth edition with the inclusion of illness as a major impact on client care needs. Articles include theory, research, and intervention approaches as well as anecdotes of the day-to-day experience of living with illness or disabilities.


In an effort to destigmatize disability and help psychologists work more effectively with people with disabilities, a pair of experts conducted this training with membership during APA’s 2012 meetings.

For more information or to receive this publication in an alternative format, please contact the Disability Issues Office at 202-336-6038 (voice) or via the Internet at http://www.apa.org/pi/disability/index.aspx.

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SPEECH IMPAIRMENTS

If a person is using an electronic communication aid, stand in front of the person and refrain from reading over their shoulder as they type. Wait for the person to construct his/her full message.

Listen patiently. Avoid completing sentences for the person.

ASK ONE QUESTION AT A TIME AND WAIT FOR A REPLY.

If the person communicates primarily through speech, and his/her speech is difficult to understand, you may find it helpful to:

Watch how the person says the words.

Tell the person if you don’t understand what he/she is saying. The person will either say it another way; show you what they are talking about; spell it out verbally; write it down; use a communication device; or point to letters, words, or pictures on their communication board.

Written communication People with physical disabilities may have difficulty writing and may require a note-taker to transcribe or take notes.

Making text materials accessible Ensure that text information is in formats that the person can access and understand. Some individuals may want information in enlarged font, electronic formats, or Braille. Others may require the assistance of someone who can help in reading and understanding documents.

Decision making and consent Depending on the type of decision to be made (e.g., health/medical, financial, or personal) and their skills and experiences, most people with disabilities make their own decisions, or, like others, might rely on peers for advice. In some special circumstances (e.g., a health care or legal setting), you may need to know if the person has a formal supported decision-making agreement that identifies the person(s) who can assist in making decisions and a process that fully respects the individual’s values, beliefs, experiences, and preferences.

Obtaining signatures Not being able to physically hold a pen does not mean that a person cannot approve or sign a document. People who cannot write and who understand the meaning of a document may use an alternative mode for signing. Alternatives range from a stamp, a thumb print, or their authorization of a legally appointed person to sign on their behalf.

Privacy Be mindful of the person’s right to privacy. While the person may rely on a support person to assist in daily activities, she/he may not want to share aspects of their personal life with that person. It is the person’s responsibility to negotiate privacy agreements with their support person.

COMPLIANCE ISSUES

As service providers and advocates, psychologists and other mental health providers need to ensure that their services adequately meet legal and ethical obligations. To improve compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act and better meet the needs of individuals with disabilities:

• Do not deny your services to a client with a disability. You may refer him/her if he/she requires treatment outside of your area of specialization.

• Do not separate out or give unequal service to clients with disabilities unless you must do so to provide a service that is as effective as that provided to those without disabilities. Try to include individuals with disabilities in classes you may have for all your clients.

• Watch for criteria that screen out clients with disabilities. For instance, do not require a driver’s license for payment by check. Use policies, practices, and procedures in your office that can be modified for those with disabilities, such as making sure service animals are permitted in your office.

Relevant Legislation

Rosa’s Law of 2010, S. 2781, 111th Congress

This bill makes changes in the language used to refer to individuals with disabilities. The law will change the phrase “mental retardation” to “intellectual disability” in all Federal statutes.


SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Communicating over the telephone Find out how the person wants to communicate with you on the telephone. She/he might want to use a device or a communication assistant. Alternatively, the person might want you to ask questions to which she/he can answer “yes” or “no.” The person may prefer to use e-mail or fax. If you have a receptionist, ensure the receptionist knows how the person will communicate over the telephone.

Making text materials accessible Ensure that text information is in formats that the person can access and understand. Some individuals may want information in enlarged font, electronic formats, or Braille. Others may require the assistance of someone who can help in reading and understanding documents.

Decision making and consent Depending on the type of decision to be made (e.g., health/medical, financial, or personal) and their skills and experiences, most people with disabilities make their own decisions, or, like others, might rely on peers for advice. In some special circumstances (e.g., a health care or legal setting), you may need to know if the person has a formal supported decision-making agreement that identifies the person(s) who can assist in making decisions and a process that fully respects the individual’s values, beliefs, experiences, and preferences.

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MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

Don’t lean on a person’s wheelchair unless you have permission—it’s his/her personal space.

ASK if assistance is needed.

Speak directly to the person and not with the person providing assistance.

• Provide auxiliary aids and services, such as readers, sign-language interpreters, Braille materials, large-print materials, videotapes and audiotapes, and computers, when necessary, to effectively communicate with your clients with disabilities. You may use alternative forms of communication, such as notepads and pencils, when these forms are as effective.

• Evaluate your office for structural and architectural barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from getting the services they need from you. Change these barriers when they can be readily changed (without much difficulty or expense).

• Assess ramps, parking spaces, curb cuts, shelving, elevator control buttons, width of doorways, lowered door handles, width of toilet partitions, height of toilet seats, and high-pile carpeting. Ensure that rooms are large enough to maneuver a walker or wheelchair.

• Hire an architect or contractor familiar with ADA requirements when building new offices or remodeling.