

## Terminology and communication tips

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with a disability.

### **AVOID SAYING:**

- Victim, suffers from, deformed, disabled
- Badly affected by, blind, can't see
- Crippled, the crippled, mentally retarded
- Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair
- Deaf and dumb, deaf mute, person who is deaf
- Disabled parking, handicapped toilets

### **SAY:**

- Person with a disability
- Person with cerebral palsy or vision impairment
- Person with a physical disability
- Person who uses a wheelchair for mobility
- Person with a hearing impairment, hearing loss
- Accessible parking, accessible toilet.

### **DO:**

- Look at the person when addressing him or her.
- Ask the person about the best way to communicate if you are unsure.
- When speaking to a person with a disability, speak to them directly, not through others who may be accompanying them.
- Address the person by their name if you know what it is.

- Offer assistance if it appears necessary, but don't assume a person with a disability needs assistance or will accept it.
- Wait for acceptance and instruction before proceeding. • Respect people's wishes.
- Extend your hand to shake when meeting someone.
- Remember that people from a CALD background may not recognise words like 'disability' or 'impairment'. You may need to be flexible and descriptive in your language to help them understand.

#### **DON'T:**

- Don't tell a person with disability that you admire their determination or courage.
- Don't express sympathy for a person with a disability.
- Don't stare at, or avoid looking at, a visible disability.
- Don't presume that a person with a disability is more sensitive or fragile than others.
- Don't assume that all people with a disability have an intellectual disability.
- Don't talk about a person as if they are not present, cannot understand, or speak for themselves.

There are many types of disabilities. This section of the booklet takes a closer look at how best to interact with people who have different types of disabilities.

### Mental illness

One in five adults will experience a mental health issue at some stage in their life. Mental health issues, at different times, can cause changes to a person's thinking, perception, feelings and emotional state. These changes can lead to behaviours that are out of context and that do not match a situation as you would expect. People who have mental health issues usually manage these symptoms with medication and support. Mental health is not an obvious visible disability and therefore requires a level of awareness.

Social interaction can often be difficult for all concerned. Be nonjudgemental and allow time for interaction and decision making.

If a person speaks slowly or appears unfocussed this might be due to the impact of compromised mental health. This could be caused by many factors, including the effects of medication or sleep disturbance.

A person with a mental illness might:

- Appear disoriented and respond to events and perceptions that you do not share.
- Become highly anxious and frightened.
- Display unusual or inappropriate behaviour or emotion.
- Speak slowly, appear unfocussed, or seem very “flat” or unusually sad.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with mental illness.

**DO:**

- See the person, not the symptoms of the illness. Symptoms of a serious mental health issue are episodic and successfully managed with medication and support.
- Read body language to assess the situation.
- Give the person their space and initially avoid too much direct eye contact and touching.
- Show understanding and empathise with their feelings, without necessarily agreeing with what is being said.
- Respect the person’s situation and do not pressure your assistance onto them.
- If a person is feeling distressed ask how you can help, but if necessary ask if they have an emergency contact number (GP, family) that you could ring.
- Use short, clear direct sentences to minimise confusion and keep your voice tone low and pleasant.

**DON’T:**

- Don’t take things personally. Remember that the individual may not have insight into their behaviour and the impact it has on other people.
- Don’t respond aggressively.

## Physical disability

A physical disability is a condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with a physical disability, including people who may be using support aids or a wheelchair.

### **DO:**

- Speak directly to the person and not with someone who may be assisting them (for example a carer).
- Ensure there is a clear pathway to intended destinations and, at meetings or restaurants, make a free space at the table for the person using the wheelchair.
- When assisting someone in a wheelchair in going up or down a kerb, ask the person if they prefer going backwards or forwards.
- Try to learn the locations of ramps and accessible facilities.

### **DON'T:**

- Only push a person in a wheelchair if you are asked.
- Don't patronise people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Never hang or lean on a person's wheelchair or tray - the chair is part of the individual's personal body space and hanging on to it can be annoying, offensive and potentially dangerous.
- Don't presume that a person who is non-verbal does not understand what you are saying, they may require the assistance of a communication aid (for example, picture communication board or talking device) but may not have a hearing or sight problem.

## Speech impairment

Speech difficulties can be associated with cerebral palsy, hearing impairment and brain injury. People with speech disabilities may be difficult to understand and have difficulty in expressing ideas.

Speech impairments may range from problems with articulation or voice strength to complete voicelessness, chronic hoarseness, stuttering or stammering.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with a speech impairment.

### **DO:**

- Talk to the person in a quiet environment if possible.
- Speak directly to the person and not with the person who may be assisting them (for example a carer).
- Be patient and don't take over the conversation because you are afraid you won't understand the person speaking.
- Always be honest with the person if you haven't understood them.
- Ask the person to repeat what they said using different words if you do not understand them.
- Ask if they can give you a clue to the subject or spell a word to help you understand (they may have a communication aid).
- If the person is using an electronic communication aid, stand in front of the person and refrain from reading over their shoulder as they type.
- Ask the person if there is someone close by who may be able to interpret for you.
- If you still don't understand what they have said, acknowledge that you have been unsuccessful and ask whether the message was urgent or if it would be alright to try again later.

**DON'T:**

- Don't raise your voice, don't assume the person can't hear you.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat themselves, they know their speech is hard to understand.
- Don't pretend you have understood if you haven't.
- Don't ignore the person because you assume they can not communicate with you.
- Never presume that a person who is non-verbal does not understand what you are saying.

## Intellectual disability

People with an intellectual disability often find it harder to learn and understand. Most have difficulty learning new things and understanding how information fits into a bigger picture.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with an intellectual disability.

### **DO:**

- Speak directly to the person and not to a person who is assisting them (for example their carer).
- Take your time and let the person set his or her own pace.
- Speak clearly and briefly but don't be condescending – all people deserve your respect. Don't get frustrated if you have to repeat yourself.
- Pay attention, particularly if the person has a speech impairment.
- Use pictures to help describe what you wish to explain when giving instructions.

### **DON'T:**

- Don't treat adults with an intellectual disability as children.
- Don't complete the person's sentences for them.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat something if you don't understand.

## Hearing impairment

Deafness, or hearing impairment generally refers to a physical condition characterised by lack of sensitivity to sound and the experience of someone who is partially or completely unable to hear. Most hearing impaired people have the ability to lip read, speak, or read and write.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with a hearing impairment.

### **DO:**

- Get the person's attention before speaking.
- Understand that background noises are confusing.
- Speak clearly and naturally.
- Look directly at the person while speaking.
- Use a normal voice, as shouting distorts sound and lip movements and implies anger.
- Express yourself – use your face, hands and body.
- Ensure there is adequate lighting, so the person can clearly read your lips and see your movements.
- Be aware that some people wear hearing aids. This helps them to pick up sounds, but does not mean that they understand clearly.
- Use a pad and pencil to communicate if it becomes necessary. It is better to communicate in writing than have messages misunderstood.

- Use short sentences.
- Face the person you are talking to even if there is sign language interpreter present.

**DON'T:**

- Don't shout. It may not be necessary or help the conversation.
- Don't look away, cover your mouth or walk around the room while talking to the person.
- Don't stare at people signing to each other. In the deaf community this is similar to eavesdropping.
- Make sure you don't have anything in your mouth when talking.

### Acquired brain injury

The definition of an acquired brain injury (ABI) is an injury to the brain that occurs after birth, which results in a deterioration in physical, sensory, cognitive, emotion and/or independent functioning.

An acquired brain injury can cause changes to behaviour, personality, physical and sensory abilities. A person with an ABI may have difficulty in asking for, understanding and retaining information.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with an ABI.

**DO:**

- Use plain English.
- Speak clearly and concisely.
- Reduce or remove any distractions.
- Look for a quiet place to talk so you can both concentrate.
- Be patient and repeat information if necessary.
- Ask clear and uncomplicated questions.

- Check that you have been understood with follow-up questions.
- Write down the information for the person making it easier to understand.

**DON'T:**

- Don't assume the person has understood what you have said.
- Don't complete the person's sentences for them.

## Vision impairment

People with vision impairment may have some degree of sight, even though they may use a white cane or guide dog to help them move around. A person is legally blind if their field of vision is less than 20 degrees in diameter. Sometimes people with vision impairment may need a little assistance or guidance.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when interacting and communicating with people with vision impairment.

**DO:**

- Speak directly to the person in a normal tone of voice.
- Ensure there is a clear pathway to intended destinations. When at meetings or restaurants, make a free space at the table for the person.
- When meeting, identify yourself and others with you.
- When conversing in a group address people by their name.
- Offer assistance when necessary and pay attention to the person's response.
- Walk alongside and slightly ahead of a vision impaired person when assisting them.
- Assist the person by providing verbal directions or by placing their hand on a rail.
- When preparing information for someone who is vision impaired seek their advice on how they would like the information and their preferred format (for example general information for people with low vision should be provided in Arial 18 point bold).
- Check the lighting needs of people with vision loss as they may differ from person to person. Many people with vision impairment are able to see much more with strong light. The most common concern is glare.

- Always tell the person with a vision impairment if you have moved objects or furniture.
- Speak directly to the person rather than directing questions through their companion.

**DON'T:**

- Don't presume that a vision impaired person cannot see anything. If you are unsure, ask.
- Don't pat a guide dog as you may distract it from its job.
- Don't leave a vision impaired person in an open area. Lead them to a landmark so they can get a sense of direction.
- Don't shout. Vision impairment and hearing loss are not necessarily related impairments.
- Don't hold onto the person's arm; allow them to take your arm if they want assistance. Check with the person if they can handle escalators and revolving doors, or if they would prefer to take an alternative route.

## Supporting employees with disabilities in the workplace

People with a disability have the right to equal opportunities in employment. To increase these opportunities, employers may need to accommodate the special needs of employees with a disability by allowing flexibility of work hours, or by making slight adjustments to the physical working environment to make it more accessible.

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when employing people with disabilities.

- Help the employee understand and learn about the organisation – as you would for any new employee.
- Describe the formal and informal requirements of the job.
- Introduce the person to co-workers. Encourage co-workers to include the person in workplace activities, without forcing relationships.
- Be sensitive to the person's specific needs, but don't lower traditional performance standards.
- Consider adjusting your supervisory style.
- Provide the same encouragement and feedback that you would for other employees, and don't be afraid to offer constructive feedback. The person may offer alternative strategies for dealing with difficulties.
- Use language that the person can understand.
- Encourage the person to pursue career development and training opportunities, just as you would with other employees.
- Arrange relevant training for staff to be more aware of disability issues and how to best accommodate a person's needs.

## Face-to-face communication

The following are tips and recommendations that should be considered when using an interpreter or developing translated material.

### Using interpreters

1. Identify the correct language the person speaks or signs.
2. Never guess the language by a person's country of birth, as there may be several languages or dialects spoken in a country.
3. Consider whether a male or female interpreter would be more appropriate, to meet the person's preferences.
4. Consider the most suitable mode of language service provision:
  - Telephone interpreting – suitable for 10-15 minute conversations.
  - Face-to-face on site interpreting – for longer and more complex consultations.
5. Book the interpreter by contacting language service providers such as ONCALL, VITS or VICDEAF, AUSLAN Interpreting Services and All Graduates Interpreting and Translating Services.
6. Always speak to and look at the person you talk with, not the interpreter.

## Written communication

### Translations

Written information is often not accessible to people with a disability who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. When preparing written material, remember to:

1. Plan for translated documents following the same basic principles as for an English version. For example, determine:

- The target audience.
- How many copies need to be printed.
- Where it will be distributed.

2. Define the objectives of your publication - do you want to inform, educate or promote?

3. Establish the format of the source information - will it be a leaflet, fact sheet, brochure, pamphlets or video?

4. Establish your target group – language, age group (consider font size), gender, and level of literacy.

5. When drafting text for publications, you should:

- Put important items at the beginning of the text.
- Break your information into meaningful segments.
- Use clear, appropriate headings.
- Use consistent grammar (sequence of tense).
- Use short, easily understood sentences (usually not over 20 words).
- Avoid using metaphors or figures of speech.
- Avoid bureaucratic/professional jargon.
- Avoid using culturally specific humour. This is usually not translatable.
- Use common terminology.
- Use an active style of writing rather than a passive voice.
- Spell out acronyms in full (for example Technical and Further Education, instead of TAFE).
- Remember to include the date of production and details of who owns the copyright of the publication.

6. Advise the translating agency of the language/s the document is to be translated into, and which words are to remain in English, such as names of places (for example, Yarra City Council).