

DISABILITY ADVICE FACTSHEETS

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Top tips

- Focus on what a person says, not what they look or sound like.
- Only ask questions about the person's disability if they are strictly relevant. Ask yourself: 'Would I ask this question of any other person?'
- Don't make assumptions about what the person can or cannot do or what sort of help (if any) they might need.
- Offer assistance, but don't impose it.
- Always ask the person to tell you how best you can help them.

Be patient

Some disabled people need a little more time to understand what you're saying, or to carry out everyday tasks such as filling in forms. So be patient, and be ready to give extra help if it's needed.

Be sensitive to language

Avoid	Use instead
(The) handicapped	Disabled (people)
The disabled	Disabled people
Epileptic, diabetic, arthritic	Person who has epilepsy, diabetes, arthritis
Afflicted by, suffers from, victim of ...	Has a condition or impairment
Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	Wheelchair user
Mentally handicapped, subnormal	Has a learning difficulty
Mental illness	Has a mental health problem
Cripple, invalid	Disabled person
Spastic	Person who has cerebral palsy
Able-bodied, fit	Non-disabled
Crazy, bonkers, lunatic, mad, insane, nutter	Person with mental health problem
Deaf and dumb, or deaf people without speech	Deaf people who sign

If you are uncertain about how to say something, a useful phrase is: 'I'm not sure if this is the right way to say this, but ...'

PEOPLE WHO ARE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

The term 'visually impaired' refers to people who are blind or partially sighted.

Key facts

- At the end of March 2006 there were 364,615 people in the UK who were registered as severely sight impaired (blind) or sight impaired (partially sighted). A further 2 million people in the UK have significant sight loss, but do not fall into these narrow categories.
- Most visually impaired people can actually see something.
- Some 70 per cent of blind and partially sighted adults have other disabilities or long-term health problems in addition to their sight loss.
- At the end of 2007, there were 2,466 guide dog owners in the UK.
- Around 250,000 people use Braille regularly.
- Audio is widely used for accessing information as electronic text and from the internet.

Communication tips

- Always speak to a visually impaired person when you approach them.
- Say clearly who you are and what you do (but remember, there's no need to shout).
- Ask the person if they wish to be guided and, if so, how. Some people will prefer you to walk slightly in front so they can hold your arm.
- Mention steps in advance and say whether they go up or down.
- Mention any potential hazards that lie ahead and say where they are.
- If you offer a seat, offer to put the person's hand on the back or arm of the chair then let them sit down by themselves.
- Don't leave the person talking to an empty space. If you're moving away, tell them.
- Don't move any of the person's belongings without asking, and make sure they have all the possessions they need with them before leaving the room.
- The person may have a guide dog. Remember that these are working dogs and should not be treated as pets. Speak to the person rather than making a fuss of the dog.
- When taking money from a visually impaired customer, always check the payment before you go to the till, and count the change out clearly, coin by coin, as you place it in the customer's hand.
- When designing signage, use bold black writing on a yellow background.

PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

Being deaf or hard of hearing can mean very different things to different people. Some people will use particular words to describe their own deafness and may feel strongly about terms they don't like. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People uses the following terms:

People who are deaf. Used in a general way when talking about people with all degrees of hearing loss.

People who are hard of hearing. Used to describe people with mild to severe hearing loss. The term is also often used to describe people who have lost their hearing gradually.

People who are deafened. Used for people who were born hearing and became severely or profoundly deaf after learning to speak.

People who are deafblind. Many people who are deafblind have some hearing and vision. Others will be totally deaf and totally blind.

The deaf community. Many deaf people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL) consider themselves part of the deaf community. They may describe themselves as 'Deaf', with a capital D, to emphasise their cultural identity.

Key facts

- There are estimated to be about 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. About 898,000 of these are severely or profoundly deaf. Of these, 450,000 cannot hear well enough to use a voice telephone, even with equipment to make it louder. People who cannot use voice telephones may use textphones, videophones, email or SMS.
- A high proportion of severely or profoundly deaf people have other disabilities as well.
- The majority of people with hearing loss communicate orally, but also rely on lipreading and sound enhancement.
- Approximately 50,000 deaf people in the UK use sign language as their main method of communication. Some people use Sign Supported English (SSE). This is not a language in its own right, but a kind of English with signs.
- People who are born or become deaf in early childhood may have a much lower literacy level than the general UK population.

Communication tips

- Don't say 'the deaf', say 'deaf people', 'hard of hearing people' or 'people with a hearing loss'.
- Even if someone is wearing a hearing aid, it doesn't mean they can hear you. Ask if they need to lipread.

- If you are using communication support (e.g. an interpreter), always remember to talk directly to the person you are communicating with, not the interpreter.
- Make sure you have face-to-face or eye-to-eye contact with the person you are talking to.
- Make sure you have the listener's attention before you start speaking.
- Speak clearly but not too slowly, and don't exaggerate your lip movements.
- Use natural facial expressions and gestures.
- If you're talking to a deaf person and a hearing person, don't just focus on the hearing person.
- Don't shout. It's uncomfortable for a hearing aid user and it looks aggressive.
- If someone doesn't understand what you've said, don't keep repeating it. Try saying it in a different way instead.
- Find a suitable place to talk, with good lighting and away from noise and distractions. If you're talking to a person who lipreads, don't stand in front of a window with the light behind you – your face will be in shadow and the lipreader will not be able to see your lips moving.
- Glass screens also make it difficult for lipreaders to communicate. Offer a face-to-face interview in an alternative place without glass screens.
- Check that the person you're talking to can follow you. Be patient and take the time to communicate properly.
- Use plain language and don't waffle. Avoid jargon and unfamiliar abbreviations.
- If necessary, attract attention with a light touch on the person's shoulder or a wave of your hand.
- Don't guess how much the person can hear, or how they prefer to communicate – ask what they'd like you to do.
- Everyone's needs are different, so always ask what's best for each individual. For example, some people might find it helpful to have notes taken at a meeting to provide a record of what has been said.
- Many older people have age-related hearing loss, but they may be reluctant to reveal this. So, for example, when a name is called out you need to be aware that a person may not respond to it even though they have not said that they have hearing loss.
- There are many people with a hearing loss from abroad who do not use English or BSL fluently and for whom further adjustments may need to be made.

PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAFBLIND

Deafblind people have a combined sight and hearing loss, which leads to difficulties in communicating, mobility and accessing information. The condition is also known as 'dual sensory impairment', 'dual sensory loss', or 'multi-sensory impairment'. They may have other physical and/or learning disabilities as well.

Key facts

- There are about 23,000 deafblind people in the UK. Some are totally deaf and totally blind; others have some hearing and vision. A further 250,000 people experience some degree of dual sensory impairment.
- Deafblind people may use symbols, objects of reference, sign language, Braille and/or other types of communication. Some deafblind people with a little useful sight and hearing use speech, hearing aids and lip speakers, electronic and manual notetakers, and speech-to-text reports (STTRs) to communicate.
- The deafblind manual alphabet is widely used. Adapted from BSL, it involves words being spelled out on the fingers and palms of the deafblind person.
- More and more deafblind people are using technology to communicate. For example, computers can easily create large print documents for deafblind people with partial sight. Deafblind people who read Braille can use special equipment to output documents in Braille. Text synthesisers can read out text for deafblind people with partial hearing.
- Deafblind people often put red and white harnesses on their guide dogs, and use red and white coloured canes.

Communication tips

- Don't guess how much the person can hear or see, or how they prefer to communicate. Ask them what they'd like you to do.
- Deafblind people may face additional mobility difficulties due to problems with balance. Crossing roads, in particular, can be dangerous. Ask the person if they wish to be guided and, if so, what they would prefer. Many people will prefer you to walk slightly in front so they can hold your arm.
- Don't grab, push or pull a deafblind person. This can be very frightening for them, and may cause accidents.
- Don't hurry a deafblind person, and try to make sure you don't bump them into anything.
- Avoid sudden changes of direction. Deafblind people often have problems with balance.
- If you offer a seat, offer to put the person's hand on the back or arm of the chair then let them sit down by themselves.

- Don't move any of the person's belongings without asking, and make sure they have all the possessions they need with them before leaving the room.
- The person may have a guide dog. Remember that these are working dogs and should not be treated as pets. Speak to the person rather than making a fuss of the dog.
- When taking money from a visually impaired customer, always check the payment before you go to the till, and count the change out clearly, coin by coin, as you place it in the customer's hand.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Speech and language difficulties cover halting, blocked or repetitious speech. These can be caused by a variety of conditions, from stammering (also called stuttering), through to cerebral palsy and profound deafness. In some instances, difficulty with speech or language may be a result of a learning disability.

Key facts

- People who have speech and language difficulties know they have to work harder with the spoken word and tend to plan better what they need to say. As a result, they often get to the point more quickly than most people.

Communication tips

- Concentrate on the content of what the person is saying, not their voice.
- Maintain eye contact as much as possible.
- Speak normally in a relaxed manner. Speaking too quickly may make it more difficult for the person to understand you.
- Be prepared to repeat, rephrase or break down what you say into individual points, and accept that the conversation may take longer.
- Give the person time to deal with speech blocks. Don't interrupt or finish their sentences for them.
- If you can't understand, ask the person to repeat themselves.
- Don't pretend to understand when you haven't. Once you think you've understood what the person has said, check it with them before continuing.
- Never assume that a person who has speech problems also has a learning difficulty.

Stammering

- Most people stammer to a greater or lesser extent at different times.
- Stammering can improve with a supportive environment and through speech therapy, but it is rare for someone to completely lose their stammer.
- Each person will stammer differently and the extent of their stammer will vary from day to day.
- Stammering is not an indicator of a person's personality, intelligence, competency or capacity for work.
- People who stammer know what they want to say. Their difficulty is in physically producing the speech, which can lead to feelings of frustration and a lack of confidence in certain situations.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

A person's mobility can be affected by conditions such as cerebral palsy, arthritis or multiple sclerosis, or by the effects of road accidents or sports injuries.

The main impact is on physical access, though people may also experience practical difficulties with writing, reading, using computers or other equipment, and fluctuations in their energy levels.

Key facts

- Some people's mobility problems are progressive or fluctuating. They may alternate between using a wheelchair, a stick or neither, depending on the effects of their condition at the time.
- Many of the requirements of people who have mobility difficulties can be met by making minor adjustments to their physical environment.

Communication tips

- Offer help with coats, heavy bags and doors.
- When you offer help, don't be surprised if the person doesn't want or need it.
- Always offer a seat, even though some people will prefer to stand because of the pain or difficulty involved in getting up and down.
- Be aware that people who use walking aids may also have difficulty using their hands (e.g. to fill out forms or count money).
- Don't tidy away a person's crutches or other mobility aids when they sit down.
- Try to provide chairs with armrests. Some people find it much easier to get out of the chair if they can push up on the arms.

Communication tips for wheelchair users

- Speak directly to the person.
- Try to put yourself at the person's eye level. Ask them if they'd like you to sit down.
- If you're at a reception desk or high counter, come round to the person's side.
- Offer help with obstacles such as heavy doors, thick carpets and steep ramps.
- Don't lean on or push a wheelchair unless asked.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Mental health affects all of us, just as physical health does, and mental health problems are very common. Despite this, many people with mental health problems still face misunderstanding, prejudice and stigma.

Mental health problems can take many forms. Some of the most commonly diagnosed include: anxiety; depression; obsessive-compulsive disorder; phobias; schizophrenia; bipolar disorder (manic depression); and panic attacks.

Key facts

- One in four people in the UK experience a mental health problem during the course of a year.
- Depression occurs in 1 in 10 adults in Britain at any one time.
- Only 2 per cent of people with a recognised mental health problem require any form of in-patient psychiatric treatment. Most people are able to manage their problem themselves through treatment in the community. This may include medication as well as talking treatments such as psychotherapy.
- It is a common misconception that people who have had a mental health problem cannot tolerate stress. We all need certain amounts of stress to remain healthy and alert, and we can all be damaged by too much stress.
- Remember that people with mental health problems have already demonstrated their ability to do challenging work under testing conditions.

Communication tips

- Don't take it personally if someone is uncommunicative or irritable. It could be part of their condition or a side-effect of their medication.
- Be patient, and be prepared to explain things more than once if necessary.
- Give the person plenty of time to make decisions.
- When dealing with customers, ask if there are any adjustments or support you can provide for them.
- Written instructions may help to reduce anxiety and provide structure for people who have difficulty organising themselves or concentrating.
- Some medication can cause slurred speech, which may give a false appearance of drunkenness.
- Taking time to explain the procedures and environment of the court will help to reduce anxiety. For example, explain the purpose of CCTV in interview rooms.

- Allow people to take breaks or get up and walk around if this makes them more comfortable. The side-effects of some medication can make people restless.
- Allow people to be accompanied by a supporter if this makes them more comfortable, but take care not to only address the supporter and sideline the person with a mental health problem.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE PHYSICAL DIFFERENCES

People who look different can find public spaces and social interaction uncomfortable or intimidating because of the attention their appearance attracts.

They may have been born with a condition that affects the way they look (e.g. a cleft lip, birthmark or craniofacial condition). They may have developed a skin condition like vitiligo, acne or eczema. They may have facial scars and irregular features following treatment for cancer or other illnesses or following a fire, an attack, an animal bite or a car accident. The disfigurement may also be present on another part of their body such as their hands or legs.

Key facts

- Over 1 million adults and children in the UK have significant disfigurements to their face or body.
- Surgical and medical treatment can make a disfigurement less noticeable, but can rarely remove it altogether.

Communication tips

- Don't be put off by someone's different appearance, and don't turn away in the hope that someone else will help them.
- If you focus on the individual and what they are saying, you will soon overcome any feelings of awkwardness.
- Communicate as you would with any other person. Listen to what the person is saying, and respond. Be careful not to stare.
- If you feel uncomfortable, try not to make the person uncomfortable too.
- Just because a person looks different, it doesn't mean they're different in any other way.
- Smile. It makes everyone feel more relaxed.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE READING, WRITING AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

There are various reasons why people have reading and writing difficulties. It could be due to a learning disability or a condition such as dyslexia.

Difficulty in reading or writing may also be related to the standard of a person's education or to English not being their first language.

Communication tips

- Ask the person what you can do to help. Give them the opportunity to explain what kind of help they need.
- If the person has difficulty following verbal instructions, speak slowly, clearly and directly (if possible, in a more secluded environment) and write down important information for them to refer back to later.
- Be prepared to explain more than once and don't give up if the person doesn't understand you the first time.
- People who find reading a problem may need help or extra time to fill in forms, understand written instructions or write cheques.
- Some people may prefer to take forms away, or to bring an advocate or friend to help them.
- If a customer is unsure about a decision, write down your name and telephone number, and suggest they think it over and speak to you later. Never insist on getting a signature there and then if a customer is unsure.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES

There are many different types of learning disability. They can be mild, moderate or severe. People with a learning disability find it harder than others to learn, understand or communicate.

The disability may or may not be visible, and will usually have been present from birth or early childhood. A learning disability is not an illness and therefore cannot be treated or cured, but many of the effects can be overcome with the right education and support.

It is not always possible to tell if someone has a learning disability from their appearance. Some people – for example, those with Down's syndrome – have physical features that make it clear that they have a learning disability. The way a person communicates could also indicate that they have a learning disability (e.g. they may have slower speech). Some people with a learning disability will not have any verbal communication, and may use special signing systems or symbols, such as Makaton or Signalong, to help them communicate.

Key facts

- The most frequent difficulty likely to be experienced by someone with a learning disability will be in processing new or complex information, both written and verbal.
- People with learning disabilities have a range of skills and abilities that should be respected.

Communication tips

If you think a person has a learning disability:

- Approach them as you would any other person. Don't talk down to them.
- Be prepared to explain things more than once, and to explain forms and documents in straightforward language.
- Ask the person what you can do to help. Leave it open for them to explain what sort of help is needed. Where someone has a profound and/or multiple learning disability it may be necessary to involve a carer, parent or supporter.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is an information-processing difficulty that is linked to short-term memory and visual co-ordination. The areas primarily affected are reading, writing, spelling, sequences (e.g. getting dates in order), time-keeping and personal organisation.

Key facts

- Dyslexia affects around 10 per cent of the population, 4 per cent severely.
- Dyslexia occurs independently of ability, intellect and creativity.
- An individual may not realise that they have dyslexia.

Communication tips

- Ask the person how you can make reading easier for them (e.g. by highlighting salient points in documents, providing information on paper of a particular colour or providing written information on an audio tape).
- Give verbal rather than written instructions.
- Use voicemail rather than the written word.

ASSISTANCE DOGS

Guide Dogs for the Blind

- Guide dogs help blind or partially sighted people to gain greater freedom and independence.
- A guide dog will have been taught to stop at a kerb and wait for the owner to decide when it is safe to cross.
- Sometimes guide dog owners will need help to cross a very busy road. If you think help is needed, ask. If your offer is accepted, let the owner take your arm.
- Guide dogs work in incredibly demanding situations and their owner's safety depends on the dog's concentration. If you see a guide dog working, don't distract it with food or by talking to it.

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People

- Hearing dogs alert severely or profoundly deaf people to chosen everyday sounds such as alarm clocks, telephones/textphones, doorbells and smoke alarms.
- Hearing dogs alert their owners by touching them with a paw and leading them to the source of the sound. As well as enhancing their owners' awareness of sounds, dogs can increase their levels of independence and reduce anxiety and depression.
- A hearing dog's special burgundy jacket helps others to recognise the owner's otherwise invisible disability.

Dogs for the Disabled

- Dogs for the disabled carry out retrieval, pulling, targeting and stability work in partnership with disabled people.
- Dogs help with practical tasks that many people take for granted but which can be difficult or impossible for a disabled person to do.
- Tasks that a dog can be trained to do include opening and closing doors, pressing pedestrian crossing buttons, retrieving dropped or out-of-reach items, helping a person to undress and even taking the laundry out of the washing machine.
- Research shows that these dogs not only provide practical help, they also act as ice-breakers, boost confidence and promote the independence of their disabled owners.

Canine Partners

- Assistance dogs provided through Canine Partners transform the lives of people with a wide range of disabilities, enabling them to live independently and enjoy an enhanced lifestyle.
- Dogs are trained to respond to over 100 commands, including assisting with shopping, dressing, lift and cash-machine operations, washing machines and a range of emergency response procedures.
- Placed dogs can adapt to each person's needs, problem solve and assist in emergencies.

Support Dogs

- Support Dogs is a charity dedicated to improving the quality of life for people with epilepsy and people with disabilities by training dogs to act as efficient and safe assistants.
- Seizure alert dogs give their owners up to 45 minutes' advance warning of the onset of a seizure, enabling them to find a place of safety.
- Disability assistance dogs are clients' own dogs that are taught tasks specific to their owner's needs.

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