

## Words matter

- The word “disabled” is an adjective, not a noun; people are not conditions. Use the term “people with disabilities” rather than “the disabled.” Similarly, you would say “student with autism” not “the autistic student.”
- Focus on a person with a disability as an individual with unique personality traits, preferences and strengths. Stereotypes of people with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures create barriers to communication and connection.
- Ask for information about the person’s disability only when it is pertinent to the discussion or when the relationship is such that asking a personal question is appropriate.
- Use direct language, not euphemisms. Terms such as handicapable, mentally different, physically inconvenienced and physically challenged are considered condescending. They reinforce the idea that disabilities cannot be dealt with openly.

For more information  
on preferred language visit:

[www.viu.ca/disability](http://www.viu.ca/disability)

or

[www.viu.ca/humanrights](http://www.viu.ca/humanrights)

*Produced by:*

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# Disability Etiquette



**Put people first  
not their disability**



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## The basics

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- Think of the person first and the disability second.
- Be yourself, be natural and don't force enthusiasm.
- A disability is not necessarily an illness. Do not treat people with disabilities as though they are sick. Treat them as healthy individuals.

## Ask before you help

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- Don't assume a person with a disability needs your help. If the setting is accessible, assistance is usually not required.
- Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it.
- If the individual wants assistance ask what to do before you act.

**Not all individuals with the same disability face similar challenges.**

## Be sensitive about physical contact

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- Respect physical space.
- Ask before touching a person's wheelchair, or taking their arm, even if your intention is to assist.
- Service dogs are working dogs. Do not touch or talk to them.

**A disability can be hidden and not visibly apparent.**

## Use common courtesy

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- People with disabilities expect to be treated with the same level of respect as other individuals.
- Always speak directly to the person with a disability, not their sign language interpreter, companion or aide.
- Respect privacy. Asking a stranger personal questions relating to their disability is not appropriate.
- People with disabilities are usually comfortable with children's natural curiosity and do not mind their inquiries.

## Don't make assumptions

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- People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do, what assistance they require and how to live independently.
- Do not make decisions about an individual's capabilities or ability to participate in an activity.

## Responding to requests for accommodation

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- If someone with a disability asks for a workplace/academic accommodation – approach the subject with an open mind.
- If you are unsure of how to respond to a request, be upfront; tell the individual you will get back to them in a reasonable time – then do so.
- If in doubt, consult with:

**Disability Services (250) 740-6446**  
**Human Resources (250) 740-6284**

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