

*Miss Sue's*  
Guide to  
Disability Etiquette



COURAGE  
CENTER

talk

*honor*

*think*

disability

*hearing*

*respect*

*share*

focus

*care*

language

*navigate*

wheelchair

*friends*

*walker* *love*

helpful


blind

challenges

relax


*speech*

*common sense*



*Miss Sue, (that's me)  
just happens to use a wheelchair.  
Other people walk with the help of  
a walker, cane or crutches. I have  
friends who are blind, but not all of  
them have guide dogs. Some use a  
white cane to navigate. Other people  
have hearing, speech or language  
challenges, or have developmental  
disabilities. Still more have  
disabilities which aren't so obvious.*

*I'd like to share some basic tips  
and advice that will help you avoid  
putting your foot in your mouth or  
doing something you think is helpful.  
How do you talk or write about a  
disability correctly? Relax. Really!  
As my mother taught me, etiquette,  
including disability etiquette, is mostly  
just good common sense.*



## Labels are for food and clothes, not people

Some of us are funny and have a positive outlook on life; some of us are gloomy; some of us are real jerks. Most of us are a little of each, even if we have a disability. Leave the labels alone – hero, selfless, courageous, brave, saint – spare me! Each of us is unique. An individual. Treat me as you would treat anyone else you meet for the first time and form your opinions based on your experiences rather than labels.

## Focus on me, not my disability

Yes, I know, person-first language can be unwieldy. Here's a tip: Put the focus on the person and their strengths and abilities. Use your creativity. Call me a "woman on wheels" or mention that I "use a wheelchair to get around." But, if you must reference my disability, please use person-first language. For example, "actress with a disability," "athlete with a disability," "coworker with a disability," rather than "disabled actress" or "disabled skier" or "disabled accountant."



## Talk to me




Talk directly to me, not to the person with me. If I use a communication device, make eye contact with me, don't look at my communication device. If I'm in a wheelchair, try to put yourself at my eye level; sit in a chair or kneel down if you are able.

If I have a speech disorder, I may be hard to understand. It's fine to ask me to repeat myself until you understand. Really. It's also OK to ask another person who is used to my speech pattern for help.

If I'm deaf and no interpreter is present, talk to me using a normal tone and rhythm of speech – and be sure to look at me while speaking so I can see your lips. If you speak rapidly you may need to slow down a bit. You might also want to use a notepad and pencil.

## Ask respectful questions, but only when the time is right



Most of us are comfortable answering a few, respectful questions about our disability, especially when these questions come from children. However, please be aware of what's going on around us. Sometimes, even respectful questions just aren't appropriate. Also, realize that everyone deserves privacy; many of us have had a lifetime of answering questions. Even tactful, friendly questions, when asked at a bad time, can spur an irritated answer. Kids do say the 'darndest things,' but in a room full of people I don't know well, I really don't want your darling dearest asking me "How do you go potty?"

## Small talk



Like most people regardless of disability, I have many interests. My disability is really old news to me. If I had a dime for every person who's asked me "How often do you charge that thing?" in reference to my power wheelchair, I'd be a wealthy woman. Small talk about the weather or the Minnesota Twins is just fine. Really.

## Can you help?



Be considerate and patient with the extra time I might need to do something and respect my right to let you know what kind of help I need. Use good judgment on whether or not to ask if I need your assistance. And if I decline your help, please don't help.

If I'm blind, please do not grab my arm and try to guide me. Ask me if I need help and wait for my answer. If I say, "no, thank you," let me navigate on my own. If I do accept help, please extend a bent elbow and allow me to grab your arm. Of course, common sense says if you see me walking in the path of an on-coming truck or headed for an open sewer, telling me to stop or even pulling me out of harm's way would be a good thing!

## So you love dogs!



A service or guide dog is usually attached to a human. So, please talk to me, not my dog.

Be respectful and kind to service animals. They have a job to do. If a service dog is in harness, please don't distract it. And, please do not try to sneak in a 'pat' or two, figuring I'm blind and won't see what you're up to. I know you love dogs, and they are cute and lovable, but please don't touch!

## Respect my space



My wheelchair is part of my personal space. Never push or hang onto my wheelchair without asking if you may do so. (My husband has permission, you don't.) Power wheelchairs especially can hurt or seriously injure me - and you - if you touch something like a joystick (controls) without realizing what you're doing.

## Words and terms to use and to avoid



Don't be concerned if you catch yourself using words like "see" to a person who is blind, "hear" to a person who is deaf or "walk" to a person who uses a wheelchair. These words are everyday terms and really won't offend. Heck, we use them all the time ourselves.

Don't use words or terms like:

confined to	crippled	deaf and dumb
victim	retarded	afflicted
stricken	mute	defective

I am just as "normal" as you are; a better word choice is "people of all abilities."

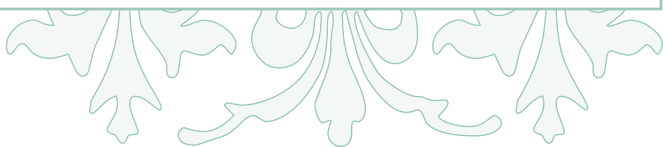
I have arthritis, I am not arthritic. It's better to say "he has arthritis" or "she has cerebral palsy."

Do not say birth defect. It's better to say, a person who "has had a disability since birth" or that she has a "congenital disability."

## Relax!



Miss Sue's best advice is: relax! If you don't know or haven't had much experience interacting with people with disabilities, remember that I am a person just like you. When in doubt, ask. Use good common sense and keep these tips in mind in your interactions with people with disabilities and you'll do just fine. Really!



COURAGE  
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3915 Golden Valley Road  
Minneapolis, MN 55422

763.588.0811

[www.CourageCenter.org](http://www.CourageCenter.org)