

The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability

Person-First Language and Disability Awareness: Interaction Tips for the Fitness Professional

By Neil Cummins

The Facts

- Positive language empowers: when working or speaking about persons with a disability, it is important to put the person first. The disability is just a medical diagnosis. It does not define the person.
- Persons with disabilities can lead healthy lifestyles.
- Persons with disabilities benefit from exercise.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) makes provisions for persons with disabilities to access fitness centers.
- The rights and wishes of persons with disabilities need to be respected at all times.

General Guidelines

- When interacting, speak directly to your client. If there is a companion or interpreter present, always direct your comment to your client.
- Respect your clients' assistive devices (canes, wheelchairs, crutches, communication boards, etc.) as their personal property. Unless given specific and explicit permission, do not move, play with, or use them.
- Be considerate of the extra time it may take your client to transfer between exercise machines or complete an exercise routine.
- Never assume that your client needs your assistance. It is always polite to offer your assistance, but once you have offered, wait for a reply before acting. If your client accepts your offer, wait to be directed.

- If you are uncertain about what to do when interacting with your client, ask. Most would rather answer a question about protocol than be in an uncomfortable situation.

Guidelines for Working with Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- When communicating with clients who are blind or visually impaired, speak to the client when you approach him or her.
- State clearly who you are; speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the client.
- Do not attempt to lead the client without first asking; allow the client to hold your arm and control his or her own movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions.
- When seating, gently place the client's hand on the back or arm of the chair so that the person can locate the seat.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the client to whom you are speaking.
- Tell the client when you are leaving.

Guidelines for Working with Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- When communicating with a client who is deaf or hard of hearing, gain his or her attention first before starting the conversation (i.e., tap the client gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Look directly at the client, face the light, speak clearly and in a normal tone of voice, and keep your hands away from your face. Use short, simple sentences.

<http://www.ncpad.org> ncpad@uic.edu (800) 900-8086 (voice and tty) (312) 355-4058 (facsimile)

- If the client uses a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to the client not the interpreter.
- If you do not have a text telephone (TTY), dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service which facilitates the call between you and the client who uses a TTY.
- Offer assistance if the client appears to be having difficulty opening a door.

Guidelines for Working with a Person with a Mobility Disability

- If possible, put yourself at the eye level of the person using the wheelchair.
- Never patronize your client(s) who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Do not assume the client wants to be pushed — ask first.
- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening the door.
- If you telephone your client, allow the phone to ring longer than usual to provide extra time for the client to reach the phone.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.

Guidelines for Working with a Person with a Speech Disability

- If you do not understand your client who has a speech disability, do not pretend that you do. Ask the client to repeat what he or she said, then repeat it back to them for confirmation.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Do not speak for the client or attempt to finish his or her sentences.

- If you are having difficulty understanding the client, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the client if this is acceptable.

Guidelines for Working with a Person with a Cognitive Disability

- Offer assistance with completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the client to accept the offer of assistance; do not “over-assist” or be patronizing.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the client and make sure the client understands you.
- If you are in an area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.

Resources

U.S. Department of Labor and Social Security Administration. (n.d.). Effective strategies and resources for working with individuals who have disabilities: Disability program navigator initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.cowinpartners.org/pastprojects.asp>

Hiss, B. & Lawson, V. (2006). Disability Awareness and Customer Service. *American College of Sports Medicine's Certified News*, 16, 2-4.

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North Carolina Office on Disability and Health. (2002). Removing Barriers to Health Clubs and Fitness Facilities: A Guide for Accommodating All Members, Including People with Disabilities and Older Adults. Retrieved from www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh/Publications.cfm