

A LINE ON LIFE

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Relating to Disabled People *

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Most of us feel relatively uncomfortable when we meet someone with an obvious physical disability. Typically, the disability seems to stand out in our minds so much — we often forget that the person is still a human being. In turn, our discomfort is likely to be betrayed by our actions, making that person uncomfortable too. How can we better relate to disabled people?



The following is adapted from a list of suggestions written by a disabled person to help us to relate to disabled people better.

1. First, remember that people with a handicap are still people. **They are like anyone else**, except for the limitation of their handicap. (All of us have handicaps of some sort, but most of these handicaps are not easily seen by others.)
2. **Be yourself.** (This is a good suggestion in relating to anybody, not just handicapped people.)
3. **Talk about the same things you would talk about with anyone else** — work, school, special interests, hobbies, and so on.
4. **Help only when requested.** If you feel uncomfortable with the situation, it is acceptable to make an initial offer to help, just as you might do with anyone. If people refuse your help, don't try to force it on them — regardless of whether they are disabled or not. When an able-bodied person falls, that person usually wants to get up on their own. Likewise, when handicapped people fall, they may wish to get up by themselves. Similarly, many blind people prefer to get along without assistance. (At any time for any person, forced help is a nonverbal way of saying, "*You are inadequate at what you are doing.*")
5. **Be patient.** Allow the handicapped person to set the pace in walking and talking.
6. **Don't be afraid to laugh with them.** Anyone enjoys a good joke, as long as it does not make them the target of ridicule or sarcasm.
7. **Don't stop and stare** when you see handicapped people you don't know. They deserve the same courtesy any person should receive. (Staring at anyone with your mouth open sends the nonverbal message that there is "something wrong" with them.)
8. **Don't be overly protective or helpful.** The disabled can do more than most people think they can — and they want to do more than most people will permit. Let the disabled set the boundaries on what they are capable of doing.
9. **Genuine questions typically evoke genuine answers.** Many disabled persons do not mind educating younger people about their condition.

10. **Handicapped people want to be treated as equals.** They want a chance to prove themselves. In fact, many view and label themselves as "challenged" rather than "handicapped." Don't offer pity or charity.

11. **Don't separate disabled people from their wheelchairs or crutches** unless they ask. They may want them within reach.

12. **Don't stereotype disabled persons** one way or the other. Don't view them as saint-like with their courage and patience. At the other extreme, don't label them as merely being helpless and dependent.

13. On the other hand, **be aware that the disabled may have their own preconceived notions** toward the able-bodied. This also may make it hard to establish a relationship. Especially if their disability is relatively recent, they may still have feelings of anger and hostility that may be expressed toward able-bodied people.

14. **Remember that the disabled are individuals with the same characteristics as anyone else.** They will probably possess a unique combination of good (and not-so-good) personality traits that you find in everyone — if you let yourself get to know them. Just so you don't misunderstand, I am not recommending that you intentionally seek out a disabled person to form a friendship. Similarly, I would not recommend seeking out friends merely because they are from a different race, religion or ethnic group. However, just as you will encounter people of different races, religions and ethnic groups, you will come into contact with people who have some observable disabilities. Rather than rejecting people merely because they are different from us, it is much more productive — for both them and us — to accept them as fellow human beings.

**We all have disabilities;
but some disabilities are not obvious to casual observers.**

If you decide you want to have positive relationships with disabled people that you meet, the above suggestions will make you feel less uncomfortable and make your interaction easier. As some of you may have already noticed, many of these suggestions do not only apply to disabled persons — they can be used with *anyone* you meet.

* Adapted from Byer, Shainberg and Jones' *Dimensions of Human Sexuality*, Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1988, page 271.