

# FGSR Professional Development

## Professional Practice Module



## Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities are a diverse group which includes those with physical, mental, and sensory disabilities. A significant number of disabilities are “hidden,” for example, attention deficit disorder (ADD), some hearing and visual impairments and some types of learning disabilities. Within each types of disability, there is also a considerable level of diversity in terms of cause, and whether the condition is regressive, stable or progressive.

Regardless of diversity, persons with disabilities share common issues. Difficulty in securing employment is one major example. A 2006 report by the Federal Government of Canada on the inclusion of persons with disabilities revealed that “adults with disabilities in all age groups, including many who have the potential to work, are less likely to be employed than people without disabilities” (Ch.5). The same report cites negative attitude as the primary barrier against employment equity among persons regardless of disability.

When asked about the most frustrating aspect of his daily interaction with others, Ikechukwu Okoro, a graduate student who is blind comments: “nothing frustrates me because I tell myself that maybe if they {others} understand they wouldn’t act in that particular way.”

The purpose of this section is to provide you with a basic understanding of the social aspect of disability in Canada specifically and to a lesser extent, the world at large. Knowing what to do about disability is one way to dissipate the negative attitude that hinders the progressive integration of disability issues in our society.

### Definitions

The definition of disability is not static but dynamic. Definitions generally vary depending on a particular historical period, and/or the experiences of those who define it. However, governments and institutions around the world generally centre their definition on that of the World Health Organization (WHO) which defines **disability** as: "Any restriction or inability (resulting from an impairment) to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being".

### Other Important Definitions

- Impairment: "Any loss or abnormality of a psychological or anatomical structure or function". Impairments are disturbances at the level of the organ.
- Handicap: "Any disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from impairment or a disability that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal for that individual".

### Disability and Professional Practice

In your professional practice, you may have to deal with disability in one of the following ways:

- Generally, in your day-to-day experience.
- As an employer or potential employer of someone with a disability.
- As a person with a disability in the work environment.

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# Tips

## 1. When referring to persons with disabilities, use affirmative phrases

Avoid phrases like “the deaf,” “the blind,” and “confined or restricted to a wheel chair.” Instead use affirmative phrases such as “person who is hearing impaired,” “person who is visually impaired/blind,” and “person who uses a wheelchair.” Remember that in most cases, it is more appropriate to put the (word) person before his or her disability.

The University of Alberta’s Specialized Support and Disability Services (SSDS) website has a list of Words with dignity. See our resource page in this section to access the SSDS link. It is also important to note that although the use of affirmative phrases is our policy at the University of Alberta, this may not be the case in another province or another country where phrases such as “Deaf person” and “Blind person” remain acceptable. It would be useful to find out what is appropriate in your vicinity, and to the person with disability with whom you interact.

## 2. Relax

If you have never dealt with a person with disability, you may feel embarrassed or nervous. Relax; you are likely not to offend anybody when you are calm. Let the person know you are not familiar with what their need might be, and ask that you be told how you can be of assistance.

## 3. Respect

Do treat a person with disability with respect and dignity. He or she has all the rights that you have. For example, treat an adult with a disability as an adult.

## 4. Offer assistance sensitively

If you offer to help, do wait until your offer is accepted, then listen to the instruction that is given to you before acting. Ask questions when in doubt. Lastly, do not be offended when your offer is turned down. Persons with disability like most people, strive to accomplish their tasks on their own whenever possible. If you ever had an injury that left you on crutches for example, you may recognize that there is pride and dignity in doing things for yourself.

## 5. Use normal expressions

It is okay to shake hands with a person with a disability. Most persons with limited hand use or artificial limbs can, in most cases, shake hands. Feel free to use common phrases like “it was good to see you” when speaking to a person who is blind or visually impaired for example. Be inclusive by treating persons with disability the same way you treat others. If at work, for example, it is the norm to refer to people by their first names, extend the same familiarity to a person with a disability. The exception in this case as well as others would be when the person with a disability has requested a particular preference different from the norm.

## 6. Be sensitive

The domain of disability and what is socially acceptable is dependent both on particular circumstances, as well as individual preferences. Take for example these facts:

- Some people who use a white cane (symbol of legal blindness) have some vision.
- Not everyone who is legally blind uses a white cane.
- Not all persons who are deaf write or read.
- Not all persons who are deaf speak.
- Not all wheelchair users use it all day. Some use it from time to time to conserve energy.

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# Disability-specific Tips

## 1. Dealing with persons who are blind or partially sighted

- Introduce yourself as you approach him or her.
- He or she would likely offer a hand for a hand shake. If not, do not be offended. Offer your hand by gently tapping yours against his or hers and, accompanying this gesture with phrases like “nice to meet you.”
- Speak in a normal tone of voice (except the person who is blind or visually impaired, also has a hearing impairment)
- Always mention when you are leaving.
- When speaking in a group, make mention of your name and to whom you address.
- Never pet or touch a guide dog without the owner’s permission.
- When offering assistance either as a guide or descriptor, be physically descriptive. For example, when describing how to get to a building, mention if there is an ascending set of stairs, a curb, etc.
- When offering guiding assistance to a person who is blind or visually impaired, let them hold on to your arm. This is the more respectful and safer technique.
- Resources:
  - <http://www.cnib.ca/en/living/independent-living/friends-family/etiquette-guide-0108/>
  - <http://www.brailleinstitute.org>
  - <http://www.amdalliance.org/caregivers/sightedguidetechnique.php>
  - <http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=36&TopicID=163&DocumentID=2104>

## 2. Dealing with persons who are hard of hearing.

- If possible, note the person’s level of hearing and their preferred mode of communication. This could be the use of a sign language interpreter, lip reading and so on.
- If you notice the person is using hearing aids, avoid long conversations in a noisy environment.
- If the person lip-reads, or uses hearing aids, speak as you would normally and keep your conversation simple.
- If it be the case that you are unable to find out the level of hearing, gain the person’s attention by tapping them gently on the shoulder or arm.
- When speaking to a person with a hearing impairment, maintain eye contact even when an interpreter is involved.
- During conversation, ensure that there are no physical barriers like your hand on your face or other barriers such as gum chewing.
- Exercise patience and be attentive. Do not hesitate to ask for clarification when unsure.
- Endeavour to repeat yourself when asked to. Saying “Never mind” or “forget it” when asked to repeat yourself may be frustrating and demeaning to a person with a hearing impairment.
- Do not hesitate or feel embarrassed to use phrases like “did you hear about this?”

- When you telephone an individual who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- For the use of a TTY (Teletypewriter for phone conversations with persons who are hard of hearing), use your provincial telecommunications relay service. The number is listed in the telephone directory. Consideration should also be given to purchasing a teletype (TTY).
- Resources:
  - <http://www.montana.edu/teachlearn/Papers/disabilities.html>
  - [http://www.michdhh.org/hearing/comm\\_tips.html#deaf](http://www.michdhh.org/hearing/comm_tips.html#deaf)
  - <http://www.lanecc.edu/disability/communicationtips.htm>

### **3. Communicating with Individuals with Speech Impairments**

- Exercise patience. Give the person time to complete his or her thoughts.
- Avoid finishing off the person's sentence.
- Ask for clarification if what has been said is unclear. Avoid pretending that you understand if you don't.
- Keep your questions and conversation short and simple.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Accommodate and encourage (do not pressurize) participation in a group setting.
- Maintain eye contact and respond to him or her not to someone else in his or her presence.
- Except you know the person well, avoid making assumption based on the individual's vocal inflections and/or facial expressions.
- To facilitate understanding, repeat what you understood and ask for clarification where necessary. You may also incorporate what you understand into your own response
- Resources:
  - <http://www.bsu.edu/dsd/fac-speech/>
  - <http://www.lanecc.edu/disability/communicationtips.htm>
  - [http://www.ucp.org/ucp\\_generaldoc.cfm/1/9/6573/6573-6573/405](http://www.ucp.org/ucp_generaldoc.cfm/1/9/6573/6573-6573/405)

### **4. Communicating with Individuals with Mobility Impairments**

- When conversing, position yourself so that you're at the wheelchair user's eye level.
- Act normal. Do not be afraid to say phrases like "I've go to run."
- Avoid leaning on or hanging your property on a wheelchair.
- It may be patronizing to tap the individual on the head or shoulder.
- Avoid the assumption that the individual wants to be pushed. It is safer to ask first.
- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening a door.
- When giving directions, consider weather conditions, distance and physical barriers.

- Maintain eye contact when in conversation with the person in a wheelchair, even if he or she has a companion.
- If you telephone the individual, do allow the phone to ring longer than usual to allow extra time for him or her to reach the telephone.
- Resource: <http://www.lanecc.edu/disability/communicationtips.htm>

## **Communicating with Individuals with Cognitive Disabilities**

- Ask the individual how you can best relay information.
- It might be easier to make conversation in an environment with low noise levels.
- Exercise patience and be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Individuals with dyslexia or other reading disabilities may need extra time for reading and understanding verbal information.
- Give direct information and instructions. Avoid subtleties.
- Offer assistance for completing forms or understanding written instructions
- Resources
  - <http://www.lanecc.edu/disability/communicationtips.htm>
  - <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/vr/publications/etiquette.pdf>

## **Additional Tip for Employers**

The Government of Canada's report (2006) on advancing the inclusion of persons with disabilities, states that aside from negative attitudes, persons with disabilities face two other serious barriers including inaccessible infrastructure and lack of support. The Federal Government of Canada in collaboration with provincial governments has various programs in place to assist employees with disabilities. Some of these programs are available in our Links section.

### **1. Include persons with disability “by design”**

"Inclusion by design" means taking into account the needs of persons with disabilities at the initial stages of program planning, including technology and physical structure. For example, in the process of creating this module on professional practice, we are labeling all embedded photos and accompanying them with detailed descriptions. This way, by design, we are granting access for persons who are blind or visually impaired, who rely on screen reading software to access the computer.

Three Pillars for inclusion [Source: In Unison (1998)]

- Rights and responsibilities: Recognizing that persons with disabilities have the same rights and the same responsibilities as other Canadians. They are entitled, as others are, to the equal protection and the equal benefit of the law and require measures for achieving equality
- Empowerment: Persons with disabilities require the means to maximize their independence and enhance their well-being.
- Participation: Persons with disabilities require full access to the social, economic and physical infrastructure which supports our society so that they can participate fully and equally in their communities."

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# Tips for a person with a disability

## 1. Prepare yourself

Before moving on to more specialized tips below, it is important to note that preparing for the workforce as a person with a disability is basically the same for those without a disability. These include making sure the job requirements matches your skills, interest and experience; checking that the company is trust-worthy and of a good reputation, and ensuring that it will be flexible enough to accommodate you in those areas where you need additional assistance to ensure your success at the job.

## 2. Inform yourself

Do your research. Find out what opportunities and support systems have been created to facilitate your work experience. Both the federal and provincial governments have set up several funds to support persons with disabilities both in school and at work. Links to some of these resources are available in this section. You may also obtain information on campus from the Specialized Support and Disability Services office. Their contact information is also listed at the end of this section.

## 3. Disclose your disability

This is especially applicable to persons with a “hidden” disability or a disability that is not obvious. It is generally safer to mention at the interview stage that you have a disability. As scary as this might seem, note that most employers will not reject you based on your disability. Once you exude confidence and appear professional, most employers who declare and practice non-discriminatory policies will be willing to hire you—your disability notwithstanding. For some tips on disclosure, visit:

<http://careerservices.rutgers.edu/disDIS.html>

## 4. Be your own advocate

Most employers are prepared to hire persons with disabilities. However they might not be aware of the type of accommodations you need. Moreover, they might also not be aware that accommodating persons with disabilities might come at no cost to them. Do your research as to what government and non-governmental programs are in place to assist persons with disabilities at the work place. Relay this to your employer or potential employer during your interview.

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# Other Resources

- Americans with Disabilities Act. Document Portal. Retrieved on January 22, 2007, from the Americans with Disability Act website: <http://www.adaportal.org/Communication/communication-techniques.html>
- Federal/provincial/territorial review. (1992). Mainstream— Pathway to Integration. Cited in In Unison: A Canadian approach to disability issues. Retrieved, November 24, 2006, from:  
[http://socialunion.gc.ca/pwd/unison/unison\\_e.html](http://socialunion.gc.ca/pwd/unison/unison_e.html)
- Treasury Board of Canada. (2002, June). New Policy on the Duty to Accommodate Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service - News Release Retrieved on December 10, 2006, from the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat website:  
[http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/media/nr-cp/2002/0603\\_e.asp](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/media/nr-cp/2002/0603_e.asp)
- U.S. Department of Labor. Office of disability employment policy. Retrieved on December 10, 2006, from the U.S Department of Labor website: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/comucate.htm>
- The Government of Canada. Advancing the inclusion of persons with disabilities. (2006).Retrieved on January 6, 2006 from the Human Resource and Social Development Canada. website:  
[http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top\\_nav/program/odi.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top_nav/program/odi.shtml)

- Succeeding in the Workplace as a Person with a Disability. (Last updated: June, 2006). Retrieved on January 10, 2008, from the Alberta Learning Information Services website:  
<http://www.alis.gov.ab.ca/tips/archive.asp?EK=162>
- Yardley, J. (Student Advisor/Academic Strategist). Specialized Support and Disability Services. University of Alberta. Interview, January 15th & 22nd, 2007.