



# THE COMMON FAUX-PAWS OF DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

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# Disability Awareness

- Treat each individual as a human first
- Use person-first language when describing an impairment (ex: person with a disability versus disabled person)
- Speak directly to the individual (not to an interpreter or caregiver)
- Avoid outdated phrases (ex: handicapped, crippled, retarded, etc.)
- Adults with disabilities are still adults (avoid trying to make their decisions for them or using baby talk when asking their opinion)
- Avoid disempowering words (ex: sufferer, victim, etc.)
- Remember that everyone is unique and each disability has a varied spectrum that accompanies it
- Ask questions when you're unsure!

# Disability Awareness





# What is an assistance dog?

A generic term for a guide, hearing, or service dog specifically trained to do three or more tasks to mitigate the effects of an individual's disability. The presence of a dog for protection, personal defense, or comfort does not qualify that dog as an assistance dog. Assistance dogs are covered under many legislative access laws for public access rights when working with their disabled handler.

# What are the different types of assistance dogs?

- Hearing
- Guide Dog
- Mobility
- Skilled-Companion (Autism)
- Psychiatric
- Facility



# How to show respect for the handler

- Talk to the handler, not to the assistance animal
- Walk on the opposite side of the handler as their assistance animal
- If you believe the handler needs assistance, ask if they'd like help but respect their answer
- Avoid asking the handler overly personal questions (ex: Why do you need the dog? What's wrong with you? Etc.)

# How to show respect for the assistance animal

- Avoid distracting the working animal (ex: cooing, patting your leg, petting, etc.)
  - Let the handler give any cue/command
- If you witness the animal do something that is an immediate safety risk (eat a rock, lick cleaning supplies, etc) then let the handler know if they didn't witness it so they can address it
- If you have a dog with you, remember to keep distance to ensure the success of the working team.

# Hearing Assistance Dog

- Try to stand directly in front of them and speak clearly
- Ask clarifying questions to ensure that you're being understood
- Do not raise your voice unless asked
- Be aware of the lighting in the environment (ex: windows, dark rooms, etc.)
- Speak to the individual not the interpreter
- If you are in a public setting with someone who has hearing loss, avoid speaking for them to others



# Skilled Companion (autism) Assistance Dog

- Understand that the individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may not offer eye contact or want to be touched in general conversation
- Use objective, clear language to avoid miscommunication
- Individuals with ASD can be eager to please, avoid using leading questions to avoid confusion/miscommunication
- Allow the individual with ASD to make their own decisions
- Avoid terms such as high/low functioning when describing an individual with ASD
- Routine and consistency can be sources of comfort
  - On the flipside, if something is changed last minute it can trigger a period of stress/anxiety while they readjust

# Skilled Companion cont.

- Remember that an individual with ASD's face might not match what they're trying to communicate
  - Reading/understanding nonverbal cues are a challenge for individuals with ASD, be direct in what you are trying to communicate
- Skilled companion dogs are meant to be a social bridge in public situations. If you want to approach the team make sure to speak to the individual with ASD
- Try to be aware of the sensory aspects of the environment you're in
  - Large groups or being in public can be overwhelming
  - Try to lessen bright lights, loud/background noises, or other aspects of the environment when communicating important topics to individuals with ASD

# Mobility Assistance Dog

- Use the phrase, 'individual who uses a wheelchair' versus 'wheelchair bound'
  - Mobility equipment is what allows the individual to participate more fully in public, it is a freeing piece equipment not a limiting one
- Assume that the individual's personal space includes their mobility equipment and shouldn't be touched unless asked and granted permission
- If speaking with an individual who uses a wheelchair and there is seating available, sit to be at a similar eye level
- Avoid asking individuals who use wheelchairs to hold things for you

# Guide Dog team

- To avoid startling the handler, avoid touching them unexpectedly and do so only when given permission.
- When approaching the handler, introduce yourself (name and title if applicable) and then begin speaking.
  - If you need to leave, let them know verbally before walking away
- If at a restaurant, you can ask if they would like you to read off the menu for them, but avoid speaking for them in social settings
- Narrate what the environment looks like if asked, with objective language
- If going to a new place, offer a quick tour so the individual can be more familiar with their surroundings
- Using phrases like, "I'll see you later" isn't generally considered offensive

# Psychiatric Assistance Dog

- Be conscious that there is a progressive stigma around mental health illnesses in our society
  - Keep this in mind as these handlers may be very uncomfortable discussing their reasons for having the dog, or even when describing the tasks the dog is trained to perform for them
- Lack of awareness surrounding invisible disabilities affects these handlers the most
- Psychiatric Assistance Dogs can be trained for individuals with a wide range of disabilities including, but not limited to; OCD, PTSD, schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc.

# Psychiatric Assistance Dog (cont.)

- These dogs can be trained to; provide environmental assessment, signaling behaviors (repetitive/injurious), remind about medications, retrieve objects, guide out of stressful situations, brace, block (creating space for handler), etc.
- Try to avoid sneaking up on these handlers to avoid adding stress/startling them
- Be aware that if the dog is blocking the handler it may be trying to create more space, so try to back up and be aware of your body language

# Facility Dog

- a specially trained dog that works with a volunteer or professional in a residential or clinic setting. The dog must be trained to do specific, skilled tasks in a variety of different situations within the facility environment with multiple clients; it must be more than just a presence within the facility. The volunteer or professional handler is trained by a program. In some countries facility dogs do not have any public access while in other countries public access is permitted only when the dog and trained handler are directly working with a client with a disability.

# Therapy Dog

- a pet dog trained to provide affection, comfort, and love to those it interacts with in many different settings. Therapy dog owners may volunteer their time to visit with their animals to facilities in which the team is welcomed or may be practitioners who utilize the dog in a professional setting. Therapy dogs are not covered under the legislative public access laws, and therefore do not have the same public access rights as an assistance dog and its handler.



# Emotional Support Animal

- a companion animal that provides emotional or therapeutic support to an individual with a mental health condition or emotional disorder simply by being present. Emotional support animals do not receive the same training as assistance dogs and therefore, depending upon the country, may have different laws regarding their public access privileges. For example, in the United States of America, Emotional Support Animals do not have the same right to public access as an assistance dog and its handler.

# Final thoughts

- Assistance animals are supposed to be a social bridge for the handler. Don't feel like you can't approach them but remember to be respectful of these guidelines.
- Everyone is unique and is going to have different preferences, ask questions to see what that person likes!
- Questions?

# Sources

- ADI (<https://assistancedogsinternational.org/resources/adi-terms-definitions/>)
- Respectability.org (<https://www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/etiquette-interacting-with-people-with-disabilities/>)
- Unitedspinal.org (<https://unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette/>)
- Askjan.org (<https://askjan.org/topics/disetiqa.cfm>)
- GDB (<https://www.guidedogs.com/explore-resources/general-information/blindness-and-guide-dog-etiquette>)