

COMMUNICATION TIPS

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Last Update: September 25, 2015

My name is Philip Ana, I am the Long Term Care Disability Specialist at the Executive Office on Aging. I have over 30 years of experience assisting persons with disabilities in the State of Hawaii.

I always strive to be courteous, respectful, and a good listener. I find that each individual is unique and individuals with the same disabilities often have different preferences. So just because one person with a disability prefers something one way doesn't mean that another person with the same disability also prefers it that way. I don't make assumptions about people or their disabilities, instead I will ask questions to determine their needs and preferences. If I don't understand what the individual is saying after multiple attempts, I will ask if there is a family member or friend that I can call or email. Often those close to the individual will provide valuable information that the individual was unable to convey.

Through the years, I have adjusted my communication strategies to work with clients who have different types of disabilities. When interacting with a person with one or more disabilities, there are 6 main areas to consider for choosing the appropriate method of communicating:

1. Is the person hearing impaired?
2. Is the person vision impaired?
3. Does the person have difficulty with speech?
4. Does the person have a cognitive impairment?

5. Does the person have mobility impairment?
6. Does the person have a mental illness?

Often, an individual has more than one impairment. So it is helpful to identify the different impairments so you know how to interact effectively.

Person who is Hearing Impaired

If an individual is deaf or has a hearing loss, it may be difficult or impossible for them to hear what you are saying; in addition, sometimes their own speech may not be easily understood.

When speaking to a hearing impaired person, make sure the person is looking at you before you start talking and that they can see your mouth. Speak clearly and at a moderate pace. Do not shout. And upon request from the individual, arrange to have a sign language interpreter to assist the individual.

If you need to telephone a hearing impaired person, dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service (TTY). This service can facilitate the call between you and an individual.

Person who is Vision Impaired

If an individual is blind or has impaired vision, it may be difficult or impossible for them to distinguish different people in a room. Each person should repeat their name to the person each time they are talking until the individual becomes familiar with each voice.

Upon request, please have documents and forms available in accessible formats such as Braille, electronic versions, or on audio tape.

Person with a Speech Impairment

If an individual has difficulty speaking, please refrain from completing their sentences. If you do not understand what they are saying, do not pretend that you do. Instead, ask the person to repeat what they said, or ask them to write it down or email you.

If an individual brings someone to assist them in communicating with you, please talk directly to the individual and not to their companion.

Person with a Cognitive Impairment

If an individual has difficulty understanding what you are saying, be prepared to repeat what you said orally or in writing. If the individual uses a communication aid (electronic device or writing pad), ask if you could use it together to help you better communicate with each other.

This individual may need more time to process what you are saying, so be patient and wait for a response. You may find that visual cues such as facial expressions and body language gives clues to if the individual understands what you are saying.

Person with a Mobility Impairment

If an individual uses a wheelchair or other mobility aid to move around, choose a meeting location that meets the Americans with Disabilities Act regulations such as accessible parking, accessible bathrooms, and ramps.

Wheelchairs, walkers, and canes are the individual's personal property, so please ask before you touch or move their equipment. Also, ask the individual before providing assistance, such as pushing their wheelchair.

Person with a Mental Health Disorder

When interacting with an individual with a mental health disorder, it is important to be a good listener since the individual may talk about several topics at once.

Do not overwhelm the individual with questions, instead listen carefully to identify the main ideas, then restate what you heard so that the individual can confirm or deny your understanding. Encourage the individual to relax and reassure them that you are interested in assisting them.

If you are meeting with an individual with a mental health disability, choose a place that has easy access in and out of the room for you and the individual. If the individual exhibits behaviors that pose a direct threat to the health and safety of you or others in your office, please call 911 for assistance.

If you are on the telephone with an individual with mental health disabilities, and you determine this individual is suicidal or in extreme emotional distress, ask the individual if it is okay to do a 3-way call with the Crisis Line of Hawaii (Oahu: 832.3100 or Neighbor Islands: 1.800.753.6879 (toll-free)). If the caller agrees, call the Crisis Line of Hawaii, connect the caller, introduce the caller to the Crisis Line of Hawaii staff, and then let the caller know that you will disconnect and that the Crisis Line of Hawaii staff will remain on the line to help them.

These communication tips are just some of the things I have learned working with persons with disabilities. If there is a specific situation that you need guidance in working with a person with disabilities, please contact me at the Executive Office on Aging.