

Tips for Communicating with People with Disabilities & Seniors



Effective communication is a critical component for ensuring the health & wellness of our members. Seniors and members with disabilities may require different communication techniques. As a SWH network provider, communication with a person with disabilities, whether it be written, spoken or some other format, should be as effective as communicating with others. Communication methods must be as clear and understandable to people with disabilities as it is for people who do not have disabilities. We hope these tips for ensuring effective communication will be useful in your medical practice. **Instructions for getting information in an Alternate Format and how to request an Interpreter are at the end of this guide.**

- Offer assistance with sensitivity and respect. Wait for the response, then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Questions are encouraged. Always ask when you are unsure of what to do.
- Treat adults as adults. Avoid patronizing with voice inflections, pats on the head or touching assistive devices.
- It is an appropriate offer to shake hands when introduced to a person with a disability. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is also an acceptable greeting.

Tips For Communicating with Individuals who Are Blind or visually Impaired



- Speak to the individual when you approach him or her.
- State clearly who you are – speak in a normal tone of voice.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person to whom you are speaking.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the owner.
- Tell the individual when you are leaving his/her side or the room.
- Do not attempt to lead the individual without first asking; allow the person to hold your arm and control his or her movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions – verbally give the person information that is visually obvious. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the individual's hand on the back or arm of the chair so that the person can locate the seat.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later."



Tips For Communicating with Individuals who Are Deaf or hard of hearing



- It is appropriate to tap a person who is deaf gently on the arm or shoulder to gain their attention.
- Look directly at the individual, face the light, speak clearly, in a normal tone of voice, and keep your hands away from your face. Use body language; it offers important clues about what you are saying.
- Ask about the best way to communicate, and arrange for a sign language interpreter if needed. If the person uses an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.
- When calling an individual who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat who you are, and the reason for the call if asked.
- Rephrase rather than repeat. If the person did not understand you, then try using different words to express your ideas. Short sentences tend to be understood better.
- Many people who are deaf prefer to use text messaging or a Video Relay Service (VRS) to communicate. The phone number you dial may be a relay operator that will use ASL to communicate your information.
- TTY is not as common, but still used by some. If you do not have a TTY you can dial “711” to reach the national telecommunications relay service, which facilitates the call between you and an individual who uses a TTY.



Tips For Communicating with Individuals with mobility Impairments



- If possible, put yourself at the wheelchair user’s eye level, or take a few steps backward so the other person does not have to “look up” at you.
- Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device.
- Do not assume the individual wants to be pushed; ask first and respect his/her answer.
- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening a door, but wait for the response and respect his/her answer.
- When calling, allow the phone to ring longer to allow extra time for them to reach the telephone.

Tips For Communicating with Individuals with Speech Impairments

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back to confirm your understanding.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.
- NEVER assume a person has a cognitive or intellectual disability when they have difficulty with speech.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the individual is saying.
- Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish his or her sentences.
- If you are having difficulty understanding the individual, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the individual if this is acceptable.



Tips For Communicating with Individuals with Cognitive or Intellectual Disabilities



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



Tips For Communicating with Seniors



- Directly face seniors when speaking.
- Communicate clearly – speak at a moderate pace and volume.
- Speak in concise sentences and use basic vocabulary.
- Listen to what the older individual is communicating; ask for clarification, if needed.
- Ask older individuals to repeat back instructions or vital information to avoid any misunderstanding.
- Be mindful and respectful of cultural and generational differences, which could influence an older individual’s perception of illness, willingness to adhere to medical regimens, and ability to communicate with health care providers.
- Always provide written instructions using clear, simple language, and summarize main points.

Requesting material in an Alternate/Accessible Format



- Standard print may be unreadable for many reasons. A person who is blind may prefer material in audio or Braille.
- Someone with low vision may prefer material in a larger font size. SWH has a library of material on chronic conditions readily available in alternate formats.
- Ask the member what format he/she would prefer to receive the information.
- Call SWH Member Services to make the request.
- Most information is shipped to member within seven (7) business days.

Requesting an Interpreter For Medical Appointments

- In many cases, SWH will cover the cost for a language or sign language interpreter for our members’ medical appointments. SWH members and providers are instructed to call the **Member and Provider Contact Center** to schedule interpreter services or to connect to a telephonic interpreter.
- For sign language interpretation, please allow ample advance notice, 5 business days are recommended.



If you have additional questions or require more information, please contact your provider service representative.