

Building Capacity for Disability Inclusion in Gender-Based Violence Programming in Humanitarian Settings

Tool 6: Guidance on communicating with persons with disabilities

Purpose of this tool

This tool provides guidance on how to communicate effectively with persons with disabilities. It is not specific to communicating with GBV survivors with disabilities, but can be used to help staff understand basic ways to adapt verbal and non-verbal communication when working with survivors with disabilities or involving persons with disabilities in community activities.

Persons with disabilities have a right to participate in our activities on an equal basis with other members of the community. As service providers and practitioners, the way we interact and communicate with persons with disabilities and talk about them can help to break down barriers to participation and send positive messages to colleagues, partners and community members. It also improves the quality of our programs by ensuring that they are inclusive of all ideas, skills and capacities that exist within the community.

Communication tips

Use respectful language

Different language is used around the world to describe disability and to refer to persons with disabilities. Some words and terms may carry negative, disrespectful or discriminatory connotations and should be avoided in our communications. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is translated into many languages and can be a useful guide to using terms about disability that are both sensitive and appropriate. Translations are available at: http://wrc.ms/CRPD_translations

Organizations of persons with disabilities (DPOs) can also provide guidance on the terminology preferred by persons with disabilities in a given country. In some humanitarian settings, the affected population may have established disability associations or committees to represent persons with disabilities – these can also be a good resource for guidance on respectful language (see table on page 2).

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| Avoid... | Consider using... |
|---|--|
| Emphasizing a person's impairment or condition For example: Disabled person | Focus on the person first, not their disability For example: Person with disabilities (CRPD language) |
| Negative language about disability For example: "suffers" from polio "in danger of" becoming blind "confined to" a wheelchair "crippled" | Instead use neutral language For example: "has polio" "may become blind" "uses a wheelchair" "has a disability" |
| Referring to persons without disabilities as "normal" or "healthy" | Try using "persons without disabilities" |

Use a strengths-based approach

- Do not make assumptions about the skills and capacities of persons with disabilities – this can affect the way we communicate and interact with them. Remember that persons with disabilities are people, first and foremost. Just like all people, they have different opinions, skills and capacities.
- Look at what they can do. This can often give insight into how they can communicate and participate in your activities.
- Greet persons with disabilities in the same way you would other people. For example, offer to shake hands (if culturally appropriate), even if they have an arm impairment.
- Speak directly to the individual with disabilities, not to their interpreter or assistant/caregiver.
- When speaking for a length of time, try to place yourself at eye level with the person if they are not already at the same height (e.g., by sitting in a chair or on a mat).
- Treat adults with disabilities like you treat other adults. Discussions and activities should continue to be age appropriate and then adapted for the communication needs of the individual.
- Ask for advice. If you have a question about what to do, how to do it, what language to use or the assistance you should offer – ask them. The person you are trying to work with is always your best resource.

Working with people with different impairments

In addition to the tips provided above, there are specific communication and engagement strategies to consider, depending on the type of disability the person has.

When working with people with physical impairments:

- Move at their speed. Do not walk ahead of them if they are moving slower than you.
- When offering assistance, first asking them what they require. Follow their instructions, and not what you think is best.

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- Do not lean on or move someone's wheelchair or assistive device without their permission.
- Discuss transportation options for activities and events. Consider what is going to be safest, most affordable and the least amount of effort for the individual and family.
- Check that venues and spaces for activities are accessible (including toilet facilities, etc.) and have sufficient space for people with mobility aids to move around the room.
- When arranging meetings with a participant who uses a wheelchair, provide space at the table for a wheelchair (i.e., move one chair away) and ensure there is enough space for them to move around the room freely.

When working with people who are deaf or hearing impaired:

- Find out how the person prefers to communicate. People with hearing impairments may use a combination of writing, lip reading and/or sign language. This can be determined by observing their interactions with others or by using simple gestures to suggest communication options.
- Get the person's attention before speaking, by raising your hand or waving politely.
- Face and talk directly to a person who is deaf, not to the interpreter (as they are only facilitating the communication).
- Speak clearly – don't shout or exaggerate words as this will make it more difficult to lip read.
- Try not to sit or stand with your back to the light – this can put your face in the dark and make it difficult to lip read.
- Do not cover your mouth or eat while talking. This will make it difficult to lip read.
- Allow the person who is deaf or hearing impaired to choose the best place to sit at a meeting to be able to see people clearly and communicate more easily.
- In meetings, ensure the interpreter can hear the presenter and the rest of the group. They should also be visible to the individual for whom they are interpreting.

A note about sign language: Like spoken languages, sign languages are different in different countries and regions. Some people also use unofficial sign language, and in these cases a family member or friend may need to do the interpretation. Ask them to teach you some simple signs (e.g., good, bad and thank you) and try to include these in your discussion with a person who is deaf or hearing impaired.

When working with people with vision impairments:

- Always introduce yourself and any other people in the group by name.
- Tell the person if you are moving or leaving their space – don't just walk away.
- If the person has arrived at a new place, tell them who is in the room or group, and offer to describe the environment.
- Avoid vague language, such as "that way" or "over there" when directing or describing a location.
- Always ask the person first if she/he would like assistance to get from one place to another. Ask

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for instructions on how they would like to be assisted and where they would like to go. Some people prefer verbal guidance, whereas others may prefer for you to physically guide them.

- If you are asked to physically guide someone with a vision impairment, they may want to hold your arm just above the elbow. This will allow them to walk slightly behind you, following you as you turn or step up or down onto steps.
- In the event that a person uses a support pet or guide dog to assist them, do not distract or pet the animal while it is working.
- In presentations, meetings and events, describe all pictures and diagrams that are shown.
- Ask persons with vision impairments if they would like documents in alternative formats, such as Braille or large print. In some contexts where people have access to computers, persons with vision impairments may prefer electronic documents that are accessible through screen reader software (e.g., Word documents).

When working with people with intellectual impairments

People with intellectual impairments may experience difficulty in understanding, learning and remembering, as well as applying information to new situations. It is important to note, however, that persons with intellectual disabilities can learn new things and participate in our activities, with just some small changes to the way we work.

- Communicate in short sentences that convey one point at a time.
- Use real life examples to explain and illustrate points. For example, if discussing an upcoming medical visit, talk the person through the steps they are likely to go through both before and during the appointment.
- Give the person time to respond to your question or instruction before you repeat it. If you need to repeat a question or point, then repeat it once. If this doesn't work, then try again using different words.
- Allow persons with intellectual impairments to ask questions.

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- Make sure that only one person is speaking at any given time, and that the person with an intellectual impairment is not being rushed to answer.
- Persons with intellectual impairments may want some more time to think about decisions or to discuss their options with someone they trust.
- Identify quiet environments to have conversations in order to reduce distractions.
- Pictures can also be used to communicate messages to people with intellectual impairments – these are sometimes called “Easy Read” documents.

When working with people with speech impairments:

- Plan more time for communicating with people with speech impairments.
- It is OK to say “I don’t understand.” Ask the individual to repeat their point, and then say it back to them to check that you have understood it correctly.
- Don’t attempt to finish a person’s sentences – let them speak for themselves.
- Try to ask questions that require short answers or yes/no gestures.
- If you have tried several ways to understand a person without success, ask if it is OK to communicate in a different way, such as through writing or drawing.

References:

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To download the report *“I See That It Is Possible”: Building Capacity for Disability Inclusion in Gender-based Violence Programming in Humanitarian Settings*, the complete *Toolkit for GBV Practitioners* and *Stories of Change*, visit http://wrc.ms/disability_GBV