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## Feeling Comfortable with People with Disabilities



Disability is a functional loss resulting from the normal stresses and risks of living. Physical and mental impairments may occur before birth, in youth or adulthood, or as a normal process of aging. Some people still feel uncomfortable around people with disabilities because of a fear of doing or saying the wrong thing. Fears ease with knowledge and a few positive experiences. The following suggestions may help you welcome people with disabilities to your parish, Bible study group, or Rosary Altar Society.

- Treat all people as you want to be treated. Relax when communicating; let common courtesy be your guide. If misunderstandings arise, don't be afraid to repeat yourself or ask others to repeat themselves.
- Encourage participation; personally invite all to share their gifts.
- Offer assistance by asking what is needed, but don't insist if your offer is declined.
- Allow people to do things for themselves, even if it takes longer or results in mistakes.
- Be patient and flexible with time schedules; allow time to attend to personal needs.
- Respect the individual's personal space and auxiliary aids: do not lean against a wheelchair, do not pet a service animal, do not grab an arm to guide, and do not move canes, crutches or walkers out of the reach of the person who uses them.
- Treat adults as adults no matter how severe a disability.
- Always speak directly to a person, not their companion or interpreter. Talk naturally to persons who are non-verbal or use communication devices.
- Recognize and remove obvious barriers; for example, people who are blind need drivers to travel and alternative formats to printed material.

Above all, remember disability is just one of the many qualities that dignifies every human life. Despite individual differences we are all more alike than different. Look for commonalities, then your comfort level, positive interactions; and parish vitality will increase.

### **Resources:**

*Opening Doors to People with Disabilities*, National Catholic Partnership on Disability, Washington DC, 1995.

*Feeling Comfortable with People who have Disabilities*. Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services, Inc.  
<http://bethesdalutherancommunities.org/resources/spiritualResources/catalog/pdfs/feelingComfortable.pdf?sc>

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*For more information on welcoming persons with disabilities in your parish, contact Sharon Urbaniak, Diocesan Disabilities Action Team, Diocese of Buffalo, 716-847-5514 or [surbaniak@buffalodiocese.org](mailto:surbaniak@buffalodiocese.org)*

