



A Word About Handshake Etiquette

The Disability Etiquette Training Company

In Western culture the handshake is the customary and respectful method of introduction, yet some professionals are wary about offering the handshake to certain people with Disabilities. The person who has a Parkinson's tremor may seem too fragile. The wife who is in a wheelchair may seem to be in a secondary position behind her able-bodied husband, the decision maker. It may not seem entirely appropriate to offer her your hand.

We may also assume, wrongly, that the person who is Blind may not expect a handshake...or we may not know exactly how to manage offering the hand to the person who can't see it.

Here we will provide some practical information about how to navigate the handshake, but before we go into specifics let's review some Principles.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF HANDSHAKE ETIQUETTE

1. Always offer to shake hands.
2. Smile, make eye contact and be at eye level.
3. Be sure you have the full attention of the person you wish to shake hands with.
4. If a person with a Disability is with a companion, be sure to shake hands with both people.
5. By necessity a handshake involves touching so if the person seems touch averse be prepared to be extra gentle or to step back. A simple touching of fingers may be enough to convey the customary respect.
6. Take your time and use the opportunity to form a thoughtful connection (thoughtful both in the sense of conscious and in the sense of kind).
7. See the person first, not the disability.

When offering to shake hands be aware of the range of issues that may present;

- When shaking hands with a person in a wheelchair, bend or find a way to sit so that you can converse eye-to-eye. A person in a wheelchair may be fragile, for

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example if she has Cerebral Palsy or Rheumatoid Arthritis, so be extra careful to notice if her hands seem vulnerable. Pay attention to her expression and respond in kind. Don't be afraid to offer a reassuring alternative: "Shall we touch fingers?"

- A person who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing may not realize that you are about to offer your hand. You may gain her attention by waving or by a light tap. People with hearing Disabilities often complain about being handled too roughly – be aware that the merest suggestion of touch will be adequate to gain his attention.
- If you are greeting a person who is Blind, just say: "May I shake your hand?" and he will surely extend his. Depending on circumstances you may want to follow this introduction by inviting the person to sit...tapping the seat to "show" him where it is and informing him about his environs: "There's a table to your left if you'd like to put your briefcase there."
- Among the most discomfiting situations may be the case where you are greeting a person without hands, either due to birth defect or due to injury. Many Iraq veterans have had amputations of limbs, whether hands or feet or both.

It's not uncommon to be taken aback for a moment, but let your good manners guide you to extend your hand in the customary greeting and let your customer or prospect guide you. Once again, the merest touch will complete this important gesture of acknowledgement and respect and will allow you to carry on your conversation having set a mutually respectful and accepting tone.

- Other special situations may arise. For example if you are visiting a family with a grown son with Down Syndrome, you may shake hands with the parents and find that the son throws his arms around you in an exuberant hug! Depending on your own comfort level you can return the hug, or draw back and say something like: "It's quite a surprise to get such a greeting, why don't we just shake hands!"

Once again keep in mind the Seven Principles, remembering always to let good judgment and thoughtful manners be your ultimate guide!

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