



### **How Not to be Awkward Around Your Disabled Colleagues/Students**

Whether it is a student or colleague, talking about disability can be uncomfortable. This is primarily because we do not want to offend anyone, and we are afraid of saying the wrong thing. However, not talking about disability is what leads to individuals with disabilities feeling invisible- and the last thing we want is for our students and colleagues to feel invisible. So how do we balance being open and honest without being overly politically correct?

#### **Two Key Mindsets are Very Helpful:**

1. Avoid unintentional/well-meaning- but ultimately patronizing language.
2. Simply check-in with the other person's preferences. ASK!

Keep the focus on the person and not on their identity. Respectfully asking people about their preferences will rarely steer you wrong.

#### **5 Tips for Talking to Disabled Students or Colleagues:**

1. Don't panic if you say something unintentional.
  - If you use idioms, or other figures of speech, that vaguely reference the person's disability (i.e., "blind luck") do not panic, simply move on in the conversation. Chances are they did not even notice!
2. Once you get to know a person, it's okay to ask them about their experience.
  - Avoid diving into the disability conversation during small talk when you first meet.
3. Don't tell people you admire them or find them inspiring for doing the same things everyone else does.
  - This is patronizing. If you are going to say you find someone inspiring, tie it with a significant accomplishment you would congratulate someone without a disability on.
4. Most people with a disability find the word "handicapped" derogatory. Avoid using it.
  - Try not to use terms such as "handicapped," "cripple," or any term like it. If you do, apologize and move on.
  - Focus on using person-first language (i.e., "person with a disability" instead of "disabled")
5. Don't ask about a cure.

At the end of the day, we're all just human beings, trying to be seen and understood for who we are. Keeping in mind the two mindsets of avoiding patronizing and asking about preferences will never steer you wrong.

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