

## **Empathy not Sympathy: Interacting Respectfully with People with Disabilities**

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### **About this module**

**Goal:** To increase awareness of language and behaviors that enable positive interaction with individuals with disabilities

**Format:** Presentation and brief reflective activity

**Time:** 10-15 minutes

**Potential audience:** general audiences, employers/business leaders, educators

**Materials needed:** Hard copy of presentation (optional)

### **Facilitator's Tips for this Module**

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Review the concepts of empathy and sympathy as described in the paragraphs below and be prepared to summarize the key differences for the audience when beginning this module.

This module is intended to improve participants' comfort and effectiveness when interacting with individuals with disabilities. It is designed to convey that effective communication with people with disabilities is not about a set of rules to memorize. Rather, it is an attitude that is based on empathy, an authentic desire to connect with the person as a fellow human being.

Sympathy implies that we recognize someone else's suffering, while empathy implies that we can relate to the difficulties that they face. We may not all have "disabilities," but the majority of us have challenges in life that we must address in creative ways. Through empathy, we connect with other human beings, even if their challenges are different from our own. While sympathy comes from our imagining how we think we would feel in a similar situation, empathy involves focusing on the other person's experiences and perceptions, not on our own comfort or prior presumptions about "limitation."



## Facilitator's Notes for this Module

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ADA Trainer Network  
Module 2d

# Empathy not Sympathy:

## Interacting Respectfully with People with Disabilities

Trainer's Name  
Trainer's Title

Phone Number  
Email/Web Address



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Information, Guidance and Training on the  
Americans with Disabilities Act

### Facilitator's notes (Slide 1)

This is the title slide for this module.

Remind participants that they may not be able to get all their questions answered about the ADA in this module. They can call the toll-free ADA Center TA line at 800 949 4232 if they have further questions.



## Disclaimer

Information, materials, and/or technical assistance are intended solely as informal guidance, and are neither a determination of your legal rights or responsibilities under the ADA, nor binding on any agency with enforcement responsibility under the ADA.

The Northeast ADA Center is authorized by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) to provide information, materials, and technical assistance to individuals and entities that are covered by the ADA. The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the Department of Education, NIDRR grant number H133 A110020. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.




### Facilitator's Notes (Slide 2)

Change this slide to reflect your regional information.

Trainers, be sure to advise participants that this training is not intended as legal advice.





**Think about what you have been  
taught about, and how you view,  
people with disabilities. . .**

## **Empathy vs. Sympathy**



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### **Facilitator's Notes (Slide 3)**

Show this slide and give participants a chance to silently reflect on their own views about disability. They do not need to share their thoughts. This brief exercise is just a way to have them begin to think about some of the concepts covered in this module.





## The Human Experience of Disability

### *We are not...*

- Tragic or pitiful
- Helpless
- Angry or vengeful
- Stoic or brave
- Trying to be inspirational
- All alike

### *We are individuals who...*

- Do things a little differently
- May see our disability as a part of our self identity
- Have the same needs, desires, talents, as others and deserve the same access to opportunities



### Facilitator's Notes (Slide 4)

The purpose of this slide is to challenge the notion that disability is always experienced as "limitation." Often, the greatest limitation experienced by people with disabilities is not the disability itself, but the attitudes of others and the barriers created by our society.



## Communication: the Basics

### **Disability-First Language:**      **People-First Language:**

- Draws attention to limitation and weakness
  - Defines the person as their disability
  - Draws attention to stereotype
- Focuses first on the person, not their disability
  - Focuses on their ability and not their disability
  - Draws attention to the unique individual



### Facilitator's Notes (Slides 5)

An example of how society and attitudes can oppress people with disabilities and perpetuate stereotypes is the use of disability-first language. This kind of language draws your senses to the disability first and can cause you to think about what people with disabilities can't do rather than realizing who and what they are and what they can do. It defines a person by the disability and can overlook the fact that people with disabilities are capable people who may simply use different strategies to do things. People-first language emphasizes the person first. The disability becomes one aspect of who they are rather than defining who they are.

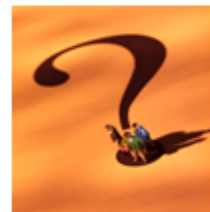
Share these examples of person-first language with participants to give them a sense of how language can make a difference:

- She is a disabled woman vs. She is a woman with a disability
- The disabled vs. individuals with disabilities
- He is confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair-bound vs. He uses a wheelchair



## Is it OK to Help?

It is okay to *ask the person* if they would like assistance and *to let them tell you how you can help.*



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### Facilitator's Notes (Slide 6)

This is arguably the most common question we hear from participants about interacting with people with disabilities. Many people without disabilities are concerned about offending people with disabilities and wonder if it's okay to help.

Helping others is human nature; we all do it! For example, if you are going into a store and there's someone behind you, it's polite to hold the door, whether or not the person behind you has a disability.

When it comes to assisting people with disabilities with tasks that look difficult, from your perspective, it's best to ask if they would like assistance and if so, to allow them to tell you how you can help. If the person declines your offer to help, this should also be respected.

Not only is this respectful, but you may find that the help they want is different from what you had in mind. For example:

- If you see a person taking his wheelchair from the trunk of his car, running over and grabbing the chair may not be helpful; it might even be dangerous if he is balancing himself against the car and your actions startle him.



- Rather than “steering” someone who is blind, it is better to ask them how you can help them get to their destination.
- If someone is pushing themselves in a wheelchair, it is disrespectful and potentially harmful to start pushing their wheelchair without their permission.
- Raising your voice at a person who is deaf is not helpful, since they cannot hear. Communicating via pencil and paper or via texting are more effective options.

## General Considerations

- Relax — Do not be afraid to make a mistake
- Treat adults as adults; they are people first
- Do not make assumptions about what they can and can't do
- Do not assume they experience their disability the same way you do or would
- Offer assistance, and if accepted, follow the lead of the individual
- Address the individual, not their companion or interpreter
- Do not distract service animals



### Facilitator's Notes (Slide 7)

Here are some basic considerations when interacting with people with disabilities. It is important to stress that there is no one right or wrong way to interact with someone with a disability because they are still first and foremost a unique individual and their multiple identities, whether race, culture, gender, age, etc. will also influence your interactions with them. These tips are meant to provide general guidance, not hard and fast “rules.”

Do not let concerns about saying the “wrong thing” keep you from communicating with and getting to know people with disabilities. If your intentions are good and you are open to learning about them and their needs and perspectives, the communication will be more effective.





## Northeast ADA Center

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### Facilitator's Notes (Slide 8)

National Network: Please insert your center's contact information into this slide.

Conclude by reminding participants that the training materials were produced by the Northeast ADA Center in collaboration with the National ADA Network. Remind them of the free and confidential technical assistance and other services available from your local ADA Center and from the ADA Centers throughout the country. Mention the ADA TA line: 800-949-4232.

