

Tips for Effective Communications

People who have Mobility Impairments

- Always ask the person how you can help before attempting any assistance. Every person and every disability is unique. Even though it may be important to evacuate the location where the person is, respect their independence to the safest extent possible. Don't make assumptions about the persons' abilities.
- Ask if they have limitations or problems that may affect their safety.
- Some people may need assistance getting out of bed or out of a chair, but CAN then proceed without assistance. Ask!

Here are some other questions you may find helpful.

- Are you able to stand or walk without the help of a mobility device like a cane, walker or a wheelchair?
- You might have to [stand] [walk] for quite a while on your own. Will this be ok? Please be sure and tell someone if you think you need assistance.
- Do you have full use of your arms?

People who use Crutches, Canes or Other Mobility Devices

- A person using a mobility device may be able to negotiate stairs independently. One hand is used to grasp the handrail while the other hand is used for the crutch or cane.
- Do not interfere with the persons' movement unless asked to do so, or the nature of the emergency is such that absolute speed is the primary concern. If this is the case, tell the person what you'll need to do and why. Offer assistance if needed.
- If the stairs are crowded, assist by helping to create space for the individual to traverse.

People who have a Mental Illness

You may not be able to tell if a person has a mental illness until you have begun the evacuation procedure.

- In an emergency, the person may become confused. Speak slowly and in a normal speaking tone.
- Ask their name and address them by name throughout the emergency response.
- If the person becomes agitated, help them find a quiet corner away from the confusion.
- Keep your communication simple, clear and brief.
- If they are confused, don't give multiple commands. Ask or state one thing at a time.
- Be empathetic show that you have heard them and care about what they have told you.
- Be reassuring.
- If the person is delusional, don't argue with the individual or try to talk individual out of it. Just let the individual know you are there to help them.
- Ask if there is any medication they should take with them.
- Try to avoid interrupting a person who might be disoriented or rambling just let him/her know that you both have to evacuate the area quickly.
- Don't talk down to the person, yell or shout which can escalate delusional behavior.
- Have a forward leaning body position which shows interest and concern. Use open palms and avoid balling your hand into a fist.

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People who have a Speech Impairment

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the individual is saying.
- Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish her or his sentences.

People who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- There is a difference between visual impairment and blindness. Some people who are legally blind have some sight, while others are totally blind.
- Announce your presence, speak out, and then enter the area.
- Speak naturally and directly to the individual.
- Do not shout.
- Don't be afraid to use words like see, look, or blind.
- State the nature of the emergency and offer them your arm. As you walk, advise the individual of any obstacles.
- Offer assistance but let the person explain what help is needed.
- Do not grab or attempt to guide a person without first asking..
- Let the person grasp your arm or shoulder lightly for guidance.
- A person may choose to walk slightly behind you to gauge your body's reactions to obstacles.
- Be sure to mention stairs, doorways, narrow passages, ramps, etc.
- When guiding someone to a seat, place the person's hand on the back of the chair.
- If leading several individuals with visual impairments, ask them to guide the person behind them.
- Remember that you'll need to communicate any written information orally.
- When you have reached safety, orient the person to the location and ask if any further assistance is needed.
- If the person has a service animal, don't pet it unless the person says it is ok to do so. Service animals must be evacuated with the person.

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People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

There is a difference between people who are hard of hearing and those who are deaf. People who are hearing impaired vary in the extent of hearing loss they experience. Some people are completely deaf and rely on visual communication, while others can hear almost normally with hearing aids on. Hearing aids do not guarantee that the person can hear and understand speech. They increase volume, not clarity.

- Establish eye contact with the individual, this is important for communication and to facilitate lip reading.
- Talk directly to the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.
- Use facial expressions and hand gestures as visual cues.
- Check to see if you have been understood and repeat if necessary.
- Offer pencil and paper. Write slowly and let the individual read as you write.
- Written communication may be especially important if you are unable to understand the person's speech or if the person doesn't understand you.
- Do not allow others to interrupt you while conveying information.
- Be patient as the person may have difficulty understanding the urgency of messages.
- Provide the person with a flashlight to signal their location in the event they are separated from the rescue team. This will also facilitate lip-reading or signing in the dark. Darkness can make communication almost impossible for those who rely on visual communication techniques.
- While written communication should work for many people, others may not understand English well enough to understand written instructions. Keep instructions simple, in the present tense and use basic vocabulary.

People who are Deafblind

People with combined hearing and vision loss. Individuals may be deafblind, deaf with low vision, or hard of hearing with any kind of vision loss.

- Let the deafblind person know you are there by simple touch on the shoulder or arm.
- Avoid bright/ glaring and loud environments.
- Identify yourself.
- Communicate directly with the person, even when using an interpreter.
- Do not assume the deafblind person knows where they are or what is going on. Share as much information as possible.
- Always tell the person when you are leaving, even if it is for a brief period of time. Leave them as comfortable and safe as possible. It is good to offer them a chair, table, or wall for an anchor.
- When guiding a person who is deafblind never place him/her ahead of you. Allow the person to hold your arm above the elbow. It is rarely necessary to "help" the deafblind person sit down or climb stairs; placing their hand on a chair or banister will give them the information they need.

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People who have Autism

- The person with autism may or may not be able to communicate with words. The individual should be approached gently and spoken to softly as high levels of sensory input may cause agitation.
- Understand that a person with autism may become stressed when their regular routine is disrupted.
- Unless absolutely necessary, don't touch someone with autism without the person's permission. Many people with autism are very sensitive to touch and simple touch can be painful.
- Understand that rocking, repetitive motion, and repeating words or phrases can be comforting to a person with autism during an emergency.
- Avoid loud noises, bright lights, and high levels of activity whenever possible.
- Don't assume that a person does not understand if they are not using words.

People who have a Cognitive or Intellectual Disability

- Some people may be distracted with a lot of activity and noise around them.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Offer assistance and instructions and allow extra time for decision making.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.

Say:

- My name is ____ . I am here to help you, not hurt you.
- I am a ____ (name your job).
- I am here because (explain the situation).
- I look different than my picture on my badge because ____ (for example, if you are wearing protective equipment).

Show:

- Your picture identification badge (as you say the above).
- That you are calm and competent.

Give:

- Extra time for the person to process what you are saying and to respond.
- Respect for the dignity of the person as an equal and as an adult (example: speak directly to the person).
- An arm to the person to hold as they walk. If needed, offer your elbow for balance.
- If possible, quiet time to rest (as possible, to lower stress/fatigue).

Use:

- Short sentences.
- Simple, concrete words.
- Accurate, honest information.
- Pictures and objects to illustrate your words. Point to your ID picture as you say who you are, point to any protective equipment as you speak about it.

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Predict

- What will happen (simply and concretely)?
- When events will happen (tie to common events in addition to numbers and time, for example, “*By lunch time ___By the time the sun goes down___.*”
- How long this will last when things will return to normal (if you know).
- When the person can contact/rejoin loved ones (for example: calls to family, re-uniting pets).

Ask for/Look for:

- An identification bracelet with special health information.
- Essential durable equipment and supplies (for example: wheelchair, walker, oxygen, batteries, communication devices [head pointers, alphabet boards, speech synthesizers, etc.]).
- Medication.
- Mobility aids (for example, assistance or service animal).
- Special health instructions (for example: allergies).
- Special communication information (for example, is the person using sign language)?
- Contact information.
- Signs of stress and/or confusion (for example, the person might say [s] he is stressed, look confused, withdraw, start rubbing their hands together).
- Conditions that people might misinterpret (for example, someone might mistake a person with Cerebral Palsy or low blood sugar for a person with diabetes for drunkenness).

Repeat:

- Reassurances (for example, you may feel afraid. That’s ok. We’re safe now.)
- Encouragement (for example, Thanks for moving fast. You are doing great. Other people can look at you and know what to do).
- Frequent updates on what’s happening and what will happen next. Refer to what you predicted will happen, for example: “*Just like I said before, we’re getting into my car now. We’ll go to now.*”

Reduce:

- Distractions. For example: lower volume of radio, use flashing lights on vehicle only when necessary.

Explain:

- Any written material (including signs) in everyday words.
- Public address system announcements in simple words.

Share:

- The information you’ve learned about the person with other workers who’ll be assisting the person.

State of Texas FNSS Integration Committee. (2013, March 1). State of Texas functional needs support services tool kit. Retrieved from <https://www.preparingtexas.org/preparedness.aspx?page=32137bc8-eed7-42bb-ad7e-2765fd8abdb9>