

# Domestic Violence Tip Sheet for Counselors: Considerations for People with Disabilities

According to the Census Bureau, **1 in 5 Americans have a disability**. Disabilities can range from physical, sensory, mental illness, or cognitive disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

A recent study found that compared to women without a disability, women with a disability were more likely to report having experienced rape, other sexual violence, physical violence, stalking, psychological aggression, and control of reproductive or sexual health by an intimate partner.<sup>2</sup>

Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse because they may rely more on intimate partners for economic support, support for activities of daily living such as bathing or dressing, and for meeting their health needs. This vulnerability can be exploited by their partner.

In order to provide equal access and best serve persons with disabilities (PWD), consider some of these tips for working with PWD:

- Use **person-first language**
  - Say “the person with a disability” rather than “the disabled person”
  - Avoid referring to people by the disability they have.
  - People are not “bound” or “confined” to wheelchairs. They use them to increase their mobility and enhance their freedom. It is more accurate to say “wheelchair user” or “person who uses a wheelchair.”
  - Avoid inappropriate descriptors like “handicapped”, “retarded”, “crippled”, “slow”, “lame”, or “special”.
- Use a normal volume and tone when speaking to persons with disabilities.
- Never patronize people by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Ask if the survivor has any individualized needs due to a physical or mental impairment. Disabilities may not be immediately obvious.
- Tell the survivor that the abuse is not their fault, particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities, who may have difficulty understanding what happened to them.
- Ask if the survivor has any individualized needs due to a physical or mental impairment. Disabilities may not be immediately obvious.
- If you offer assistance and the person declines, do not insist. If it is accepted, ask how you can best help, and follow directions. Do not take over.
- Do not make assumptions about what a person can and cannot do. A person with a disability is the best judge of his or her own capabilities.
- Do NOT distract service dogs.
- When working with an individual with a disability, mirror their language—use the same words they use to describe themselves and their situation.
- Before you ask questions about their situations, ask for their consent—ask if it is alright if you ask them some personal questions.
- Know your local domestic/intimate partner violence providers, and refer services for services.

Disability	Tips
Physical	Get on eye level; personal space includes a person's wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aid (never move or touch someone's crutches, walker, cane, or other mobility aid without permission).
Visual	Identify yourself when approaching; identify when you are leaving; wave at the person to get their attention.
Hearing	Speak towards the person, not the interpreter; do NOT cover your mouth, use certified interpreters; be aware of phone relay services, local interpreters, and bilingual individuals who may be able to provide assistance.
Cognitive	Address the person directly; be concrete and specific; treat an adult like an adult; repeat information using different wording or a different communication approach; allow time for the information to be fully understood.

Keep in mind non-traditional signs of abuse of PWD<sup>3</sup>, including:

- An individual's service animal being targeted.
- Wheelchairs or other assistive technology being withheld, damaged, or tracked by an abuser.
- Using disability to shame or guilt the PWD.
- Withholding assistance after agreeing to provide it.
- Controlling or stealing a PWD's resources (medication, disability check, etc.)

#### Resources:

- For more information about working with PWD, visit: <http://fodh.phhp.ufl.edu/>
- For information about CDC Disability and Health Programs throughout the country, visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/programs.html>
- For more resources about PWD and domestic violence, the National Center for Victims of Crime has a resource directory for service providers: <http://victimsofcrime.org/library/resource-directory-victims-with-disabilities/domestic-violence-services>

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#### References:

1. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html>
2. Breiding, M.J., Armour, B.S. (2015). The association between disability and intimate partner violence in the United States. *Annals of Epidemiology*; 25(6): 455-457. doi: 10.1016/j.annepidem.2015.03.017.
3. <http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/domestic-violence-disabilities/>