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Knock, Knock, Who's There? The Do's and Don'ts of Being Employed in Someone's Home

By: Gerianne B. Hull

As either an attendant, a Direct Support Professional, a visiting nurse, a social worker, etc., what should you be mindful of when going into someone's home? What are the "Do's & Don'ts" to be alert to?

You may now be asking yourself "Why should you bother to read this piece?" Or perhaps a better question: "What makes this relatively unknown person think she's qualified to write about this topic?"

The answer is simple and it's this: I bring first voice and a wealth of experience in this realm, from "the other side." I am a user of such services. I've had Cerebral Palsy since birth and I've always considered my disability a gift, as I firmly believe I have lived (and am living) a much fuller life because of it than I would ever have without it. For the past 10+ years, I have been receiving government funding which allows me to hire my own attendants. In telling you this about myself, it is my hope that this article will help present and future attendants (DSP[s]) or anyone with a disability who is in a similar situation as mine.

Editors: Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed.
Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP

Two side notes which I feel worthy to mention:

- Although my disability is strictly physical, many of the tips outlined in the following article can be applied to a variety of circumstances. Although those with intellectual disabilities may not be able to conduct the hiring of their attendants themselves, I strongly urge those doing the hiring to involve them as much as possible.
- I realize that various places use various titles for "attendants." In Nova Scotia, where I am, "Caregivers" is the all too common label of choice. Personally, I find the "Caregiver" title appalling, insulting, and patronizing. I refuse to use it because I do not need to be "cared for" or "looked after." I need physical assistance. The difference is one of attitude and respect. My attendants assist me both in my home and in the community.



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With that said, let's get into the "Do's and Don'ts" shall we? (You should know that I've also asked my current attendants if they had any tips, and I've included their suggestions here within.)

- My first tip is when applying to be an attendant, **READ THE AD!** This may sound obvious, but you'd be astonished how many people expect full-time hours when my ad clearly states "part-time." It's at the point where I almost feel like I should post a neon billboard saying **PART-TIME ONLY!!!!** in bold red lettering. (Actually, come to think of it, I do have it in big bold blue letters whenever I post it on my blog.)
- If you're invited for an interview and you agree to a time, **SHOW UP!** Again, you'd be astonished how much of my busy schedule I've had to waste waiting for interview candidates who never show up.
- For the interview, do not come extremely early. Remember, you're going to someone's home, not an office. (Ok, in my case it's kind of both, but that's me.) Showing up 5-10 minutes early is fine. Showing up 45 minutes early is not cool at all. If transportation deems you to be in the area way early, go grab a coffee, or go for a walk or something. Don't assume you can just embark on the person's time and space; but don't be late either. And if you're going to an apartment building, don't loiter in the lobby.
- **DON'T** assume you can bring all your buddies and have a group interview. I swear, I've had this happen! A group of apartment mates (with almost identical names) all applied, then all showed up together. When I told them no way to a group interview, they did take turns hanging out downstairs in my lobby.
- Most likely if you've made it to the interview stage, you've likely exchanged a few emails/texts/phone calls, etc. Be mindful of your potential future boss's terminology. If you're already in this line of work, don't call your future boss your "client." That person will be your "employer" not your client. If your future employer doesn't use such terms as "caregiver," don't call yourself one. If she/he uses that term, then fine, use it.
- Don't use jargon or automatically assume the person you're talking to knows about (or even cares about) your credentials. "I'm a CCA, an LPN, an XYZ!" "I have clients like you at the "Mini-Mouse is Stuck in This Hell Hole Residence." ('Hmmm, I don't care! Can you wipe my butt? Can you do a pivot transfer? With all your CCA-XYZ, do you think you know more about what I need than I do?... Because YOU DON'T! I don't care how many people you've worked with who have CP. You haven't worked with me.' These are my thoughts while you're prattling about your grand credentials.)
- Don't assume the person you're talking to knows about "care facilities" (i.e., nursing homes, group homes, agencies, etc.).
- Don't feel free to be crass. I once had a candidate say (in the interview): "I'm a CCA! At work we say it stands for 'continually cleaning up crap and wiping asses.'"
- Don't ask stupid, institutional questions, p-l-e-a-s-e! "How many showers do you have per week? What days? When is laundry day? (Laundry day is either when I run out of clean clothes, or if I actually have a few hours at home with an attendant. Otherwise it gets done when it gets done.) Don't worry. You'll be told all these kinds of things IF you get the job. And **DON'T** assume you've got the job, just because you're a CCA-XYZ. To be honest, I prefer hiring people with zero credentials/experience but have a like-minded attitude.
- Don't feel free to "pop by" to ask questions or "see how things are going" any time you feel like it, or before you've actually started working regular shifts.
- If your prospective new employer happens to have a speech impediment, your questions/conversation should still be directed to that person. YOU may have an understanding problem, THEY don't! And odds are they're already mindful that you may have a comprehension issue, and they have already anticipated that, by having someone to act strictly as an interpreter, much the same as a deaf person would.

- While you are being orientated on the job, don't assume your boss is physically incapable of doing a blessed thing without you. Don't automatically jump up to wheel them wherever YOU THINK they're going. He/she may not be going there! They may not be going anywhere at all! She/he may simply be adjusting him/herself. If he/she wants your assistance, you'll be asked for it. No worries. And remember, she/he managed just fine before YOU came along.
- Be respectful and mindful that you are in a stranger's home. Don't feel that you can freely roam around the joint or pick up whatever catches your eye to look at it, especially if more than one person is living there. Some people are extremely private and possessive of their stuff. Others are more relaxed. A minister I know once taught me about the concept of "earning the right." He gave the example of being called to help a family he didn't know whose child had just died. The family was in shock, deep pain, and immense grief. Any clergy worth any fathom of his/her collar, should NEVER say, "Ohh you know. It was her/his time. It was God's will....." BS! A wise clergy will sit with the grieving family in their sorrow; listen to them, and when they ask, "Why?" (and they will ask why - repeatedly) not give platitude answers. No answer is ever going to give them what they truly want – their little girl/boy back. It's only after you've listened, have an understanding of who they are and what's important to them, have you "earned the right" to begin to minister to them, in a way that is helpful to them.

Ok, so back to your role as an attendant who's landed the gig.

- BE ON TIME, **ALWAYS!** I cannot stress this enough, especially if you're working for someone such as myself who has periods of being without an attendant during the day. I often have many things going on in my day – meetings, shopping to do, ARTICLES TO WRITE, work to get done and a gazillion other things. If you're late, (A) I'm lying in bed wondering if I'm about to be lying there until my next attendant comes, which can be several hours after my night's sleep. (B) You're putting me behind in my planned day. (C) I may have someone (or several people) coming to my home for a meeting or a visit. If I'm not up, I can't (and in that state I don't want to) let them in. If you're coming mid-day or later, it's likely been at least a few hours since I've used the washroom, so if you're 15 minutes late, or even 5 minutes late, well..... we could have a messy situation to deal with that neither I, nor you, will enjoy – especially me!
- If you absolutely need to call in sick, MAKE SURE ANOTHER ATTENDANT CAN COVER YOUR SHIFT, ESPECIALLY IF YOUR SHIFT IS THE FIRST ONE OF THE DAY!
- DO NOT ASSUME you can switch your shift with another attendant. Your boss knows the strengths and weaknesses of each attendant and she/he will likely plan some needs based on who they've chosen to work what shifts.
- Don't assume all requests for time off will be granted. If two (or more) attendants request the same dates/times off, it may not be possible to have your request granted. And remember, it is a request, not an automatic given.
- Here's one from one of my current attendants. Don't assume that you can "tidy up and reorganize things." When this attendant was going to school and had her own apartment, in her words, "It was messy, but it was my mess, and it was how I wanted it. I knew where everything was." Then her cousin came to stay for a few days. While my attendant was out one day, her cousin decided to "tidy up." My attendant WAS NOT amused, nor the least bit grateful. She couldn't find most of her "most often used" stuff.
- Don't go to work (or to the interview) looking like you just crawled home from an all-night bar hop, especially if you will be accompanying your boss out in public, shopping, to meetings, to church, to events, etc.
- If you accompany your boss to business meetings or networking functions, know proper decorum.

- If your boss asks you to take notes for him/her, know how to take good notes. Don't just sit there and space out or play on your phone.
- Be attentive to your boss's physical needs, but don't undermine your employer's authority in conducting his/her business in the presence of others.
- Don't feel free to participate in the conversation unless "your boss" invites you to; even if others invite you to, don't unless the invite comes directly from your boss.
- In meetings, sit nearby your boss but don't sit at the table unless "your boss" invites you to. Ask your boss where he/she wants you to sit.
- Discreetly ask your boss if she/he has everything they need before the meeting starts, but DO NOT be patronizing or "motherly" in doing so. Respect your boss's dignity and don't embarrass him/her in front of his/her associates/colleagues.
- When you're working in your employer's home, remember it's THEIR HOME! Don't go barging in on your cell phone in the middle of an argument or conversation with someone.
- Don't open the door with your first words being a complaint about traffic, weather, how tired you are, etc., especially first thing in the morning when you're there to help your boss get up and start their day.
- Don't swing their entrance door open saying: "OMG! I have to pee!!!! And then go zooming into their washroom. Maybe, just maybe, they'd like to use THEIR WASHROOM first.
- Home time in your employer's place may be casual, (after all they need downtime too) but DON'T assume this gives you the right to do your own activities on your devices. Your employer is paying you to do things for her/him, not for yourself. Your employer is not paying you to catch up on your personal things that you don't get time to do in your off hours. If occasionally you have something pressing to get done, at least talk to/ask/explain to your boss.
- Don't be on your phone or texting a lot during your work time. Again, we all have situations that arise that require a quick response. Again, whenever such things arise, let your employer know that you have an important matter that needs your attention for a few minutes.
- Don't get into personal arguments/conversations on your phone at work.
- Don't bring a bad mood/attitude into your boss's home. Leave it outside their door.

This type of work goes far beyond a mere "caregiver" role. If you do this job well, you are quite literally assisting someone in making their own contribution to this world. Your boss just may be a vehicle for great change that will affect many and, by assisting them, you'll have a front-row seat to watch the whole thing unfold. It's just my opinion, but I think that has to bring much more satisfaction than "looking after" someone.

Clearly my list of "Do's and Don'ts" can be endless and perhaps sometime after this article is published, I may add it to my blog (www.disabilitypride.net) and keep adding to it. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have at any time.

About the Author

Gerianne B. Hull is a Blogger/Writer/Poet/Indie Publisher. She now owns and produces her work on www.disabilitypride.net She writes in several genres, including, disability issues, Theology and Disability, self-confidence, relationships and online dating. She was also editor of a business development publication in Pasadena, Newfoundland and Labrador, and wrote numerous articles for that publication. Gerianne currently resides in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

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The Power in “My” - Letter to the Editors

I have just read “**The Power of ‘my’**” By Heather Hermans. It is refreshing to hear echo out there on this topic which is close to my heart. I have been discussing the disempowerment of the words we use for many years in the agency where I work. I have specifically talked about all of the examples given in the article.

Some food for thought; in addition to the ideas in the article, I also believe as DSP’s we need to stop bathing people, feeding people, dressing people, etc. and instead we should help people have a bath, help people eat their meal, help people get dressed, etc. And we definitely need to start helping people use the washroom. For me the worst term so commonly used is “toileting someone”. It seems especially dehumanizing. A toilet is a thing (for doing you know what), not a verb. Who ever says, “I’m going to toilet myself, be right back”?

We need to equalize ourself with the person we’re supporting in any and every way we can. When we do tasks “TO” people, it disempowers them and dishonours their autonomy. Just because someone needs help, it doesn’t have to equal a loss of power, and we are a support in THEIR life, they are not our task. I agree that we have to think beyond our practices (and mission statements, etc.). Our words we use are an indicator of our deeper understanding (or lack of). Words affect how we see the people we support (even subconsciously) which affect how we do our job. Unfortunately many have been conditioned to accept that they are “less than” and therefore accept how they are treated or talked about.

Thanks for the work you do. I’ve seen you several times speak, read your work and we met personally once many years ago. Always been a fan.

Take Care.

J Turnbull

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