

**Brief summary of the 8 Guidelines presented in this podcast:**

1. Disability is a normal part of the human condition
2. There is not just one way to experience disability
3. The language we use is important
4. Don't assume, ask
5. Wheelchairs, walkers, other assistive devices and support animals should be considered part of the person
6. A majority of disabilities are invisible
7. We are all in search of some sort of connection
8. Pay attention to your own biases

Special Edition of the DisTopia Podcast: LaughFest Volunteers

[Music Plays]

Woman's Voice: From DisArt, it's DisTopia.

[Music Plays]

Chris: Hi folks. Welcome to a special edition of the DisTopia podcast. I'm one of your hosts, Chris Smit.

Jill: And I'm the other one; Jill Vyn.

Chris: And we are thrilled to be able to talk to you, a LaughFest volunteer, about how to approach and how to talk to and how to help Disabled people who are gonna be headed out to LaughFest.

Jill: Mmmhmmm. And we are honored and thrilled to be here to talk with you because we really respect LaughFest and their commitment that they show to both the emotional and physical health of the people in our community. And so we also really appreciate, from a different perspective,

how much variety there is. As you know there are free shows to paid shows to premier shows to local shows and everything in between. From Laughter Yoga to their 1K Fun, Funderwear Run or whatever it may be called.

Chris: Yeah, I'm not doing that one.

Jill: No? You're not doing that one? Well, that would be fun but...

Chris: No.

Jill: But we just love that there's a variety and that commitment that they've made as an organization to try and get as many people in our community out and about. And so we are here to talk about maybe a few tips; something that you can take away with to help the experience of our Disabled visitors.

Chris: Yeah, absolutely. And this is not an exhaustive list but it is seven guidelines. Seven things to think about as you do your work with LaughFest. And we'll start with number 1. **Disability is a normal part of the human condition.** So we often think about disability as something unwanted or unexpected. So rather than assume that a person's disability is unwanted or a burden, we have found it useful to disconnect negative connotations like pity or fear or even curiosity from our definitions of disability. It really helps to get us all to think about the fact that we are all human first and that disability is probably something that these folks have dealt with for a long time and they're probably pretty well versed in what they need.

Jill: Or, if they haven't that maybe thinking they'd, there's not something for them in the community and so we hope that LaughFest becomes a place where people can say, "Hey, I can find something for me."

Chris: Absolutely.

Jill: And I can be part of this and enjoy it as well.” So the 2nd guideline that we’d like to share is the idea that **disability is not** a universally, **a universal experience** in that everybody experiences disability different. Everybody does life differently and so we think it’s important to think about how like race, and class, and ethnicity and gender, disability is never experienced the same from one person to the next. So each experience of disability is unique and if we think about it in that terms we’re less likely to make harmful assumptions about the ways our guests and visitors *should* experience LaughFest, but rather, be open to how they want to experience it and the different ways and the different needs that they have.

Chris: Yeah. There’s no cookie cutter that’s it’s gonna to fit.

Jill: No, there’s not.

Chris: Speaking of cookie cutter. Although maybe not. **The language we use is important.** Maybe cookie cutter is an offensive word to bakers. I’m not sure but anyways. Listen. Consider all the ways in which we talk about disability that might be harmful. Think about hearing the words, “lame”. “Oh, man, this is so lame.” Or, “That’s crazy!” or retarded or crippled, right? Think about hearing them in conversation even when said without the intent of harm, right, all these words discriminate against Disabled people. So, what we and LaughFest are encouraging you to do is when identifying Disabled visitors and guests consider using the phrase, “people with disabilities” or “Disabled people” as those are considered in the Disabled community most respectful and most highly used.

Jill: Yeah, you know, actually a personal thing. My daughter ruined something at home. My first thought was to call it “deformed”.

Chris: Right (laughs)

Jill: And then I think, “Oh, gosh.”

Chris: (Laughs) You can't say that.

Jill: I can't really say that. That's just not very thoughtful. So, misshapen.

Chris: Misshapen, right.

Jill: So, what are the ways that we can talk using other words and how can we build our vocabularies to be a little bit more sensitive?

Chris: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Jill: So, another idea and another guideline that we encourage you to follow is the idea of **don't assume, Instead, ask**. You may have heard this before but we just want to reiterate it. It's easy to assume that we know better when it comes to accessibility, accommodation, and assistance. I mean, you're all volunteers. You love. I mean you're doing hospitality. So, here's an opportunity to say I know how to do hospitality better than maybe the person coming in the door. But we want to encourage you to pause and pay attention to the Disabled person's opinions and needs and allow them to tell you what they need. Ask them instead of assuming for them what's going to be best way that they can experience the show.

Chris: Well and we can promise you that that's something that not all Disabled people get when they're in public. They're often, you know, their needs or their certain desires or even their opinions about things are often not listened to and so this is a great opportunity, especially in an entertainment context, right, to put them in the driving seat.

Jill: Yeah, and I would say if you are asking, which we encourage you to do, is look at the person who's disabled. Don't look at the caregiver. Don't

look at the spouse or the child. Look, if this is an adult person, look directly at the person and talk to him or her.

Chris: Here's another tip. Number 5 When you're thinking about **wheelchairs or walkers or other assistive devices** which would include, we've said before, it would probably include service animals as well. Those things are considered or **should be considered part of the person**. So many Disabled people understand their wheelchairs and the things that they use, walkers and devices as extensions of their identities. Don't lean on them. Don't touch them unless you're asked to do so. Be careful to ask before pushing a wheelchair or interacting in any way with the equipment that people use to get around LaughFest.

Jill: Yeah. And then we come to the idea of thinking about what do you with invisible disabilities. And identifying Disabled people as those who are only visibly disabled. So people using the walkers and the wheelchairs and the other assistive devices as Chris was just mentioning is a mistake. It's an easy mistake for any volunteer or staff member to make but we must all remember that **a majority of disabilities are invisible** and the idea that if you have one disability you don't have another. So if I am using a wheelchair, well, I must not have an invisible disability as well. I'm not saying everybody does that but it's easy to separate the two.

Chris: Or, sometimes it's easy to put them together, too. As a guy who uses a wheelchair myself, people often talk loudly to me, yeah. (speaking loudly) "HI CHRIS!" Yeah, okay, I get it. But again these invisible disabilities, I think, are really important for us to think about.

Jill: Yeah, it can be anything from a hearing impairment, a visual impairment, cognitive disability, autism, mental or physical illness, and any other neurological condition that remains hidden from the public, yet is so much a part of the identity of the individual as any other physical or mental difference.

Chris: Yeah, absolutely. Alright Number 7 and the last one. I want to talk with you the importance of the relationships that we make during events like this and community building. DisArt, we find it really important to remember that at the base level as human beings **we are all in search of some sort of connection**. This simply means that all of us, Disabled or nondisabled, wish to be in community with other people. That's how we all flourish is when we are together. So, while interacting with Disabled people might be new for you, remember that beneath it all, right, how we look or how we communicate or how we interact with our surroundings. Beneath all of that we all are thriving and we all do thrive relationally. Talk to people in ways that you would like to be talked to. It's an important one, don't you think?

Jill: Yeah, I think it's about just meeting people where they're at.

Chris: Yeah, and understanding that they're there to have fun and they're there to be part of a community and if we can help them do that in a way that's comfortable and empowering that would be the best.

Jill: And I think there's one more on here that hasn't been added. It's starting to **pay attention to your own biases**. Your own assumptions that you make and you'll be so much better off if you can catch yourself. We don't expect anybody to have all the answers or to know exactly how to interact with everybody who's Disabled. Because we don't expect anybody to know how to interact perfectly every time with some who's not disabled. So, forgive yourself.

Chris: Yep, give yourself grace. Absolutely.

Jill: But start paying attention.

Chris: Pay attention. That's good. Yeah, exactly.

Jill: So we thank all of you for all of your work and all of your time and commitment to LaughFest to help make it a great event in 2019 and we also give a huge thanks to LaughFest for having us be part of this.

Chris: Yeah, let's make this year seriously funny and seriously accessible.

Jill: Well, there you go, Chris.

Chris: See how I did that? See how I did that? Good, good. Alright. Hey thanks for listening everybody. Have a great LaughFest.

[Music plays]