

## Dignity and Respect – Things That Make You Go ... Huh?

Posted 6/29/2021 via Capstone Newsletter

By Elizabeth Sites | CQL Quality Enhancement Specialist

How a person is perceived and treated by others influences how that person behaves. The concept of dignity and respect is certainly about choice, decision-making, and dignity of risk, along with the niceties of “thank you” and “you’re welcome.” But it goes beyond these things alone. It involves what we believe about people, how we talk about them, how we talk to them, and how we interact with them.



### Defining Dignity and Respect

Respect can be defined as “showing regard or consideration for” and dignity can be defined as “worthiness.” Most people do not act in a way that is blatantly disrespectful to others or make them feel undignified. However, there are so many more subtle behaviors and actions that people engage in that can be disrespectful. The specific actions we will talk about below are not systemic issues related to respect, but more so “everyday life” type examples. CQL has published a number of articles on ableism that speak to the deep-rooted respect issues people with disabilities face.

Think to yourself for a minute how you define respect. What is that definition? What does respect mean to you and look like in your life? What behavior and actions do you expect people to show as a sign of respect?

I will start. One behavior that is important to me in regard to respect is this: do not ask me a question and then not even listen to the answer. It is so annoying and disrespectful. Why ask the question if you are not going to even listen to the answer? Also, does anyone else hate that feeling of being ignored? Those things such as not receiving a return phone call, people showing up late or not at all and then not giving a reason why, etc.?

### Ten Subtle Signs of Disrespect

After surveying our staff, the following examples demonstrate subtle signs of disrespect that we have noticed during accreditation, trainings, certifications, etc. that can negatively affect dignity and respect of people with disabilities who are receiving services.

#### 10. Sing-Song Tone

This is something that many of us are guilty of doing without realizing we are doing it. But have you ever used a different tone or pitch when speaking to someone with a disability? It makes it sound like someone is talking to a baby or a pet. If that same tone were used with a friend, colleague, or family member, I know that they would look at me like something was wrong and call me out on it.

## 9. Speaking For Someone Unnecessarily

Sometimes people (all people) need support in getting their point across to others. Some people need this help more consistently in their lives. However, simply jumping in and speaking for someone without ever giving the person the chance to do it themselves is not only a sign of disrespect, but also plain rude. If a question is being directed specifically to me, I do not care for other people just jumping in and answering for me. Also, if I were being introduced to someone and the person making the introduction said to me “tell them your name,” I would feel like a child.

## 8. Not Being “Allowed” To Eat In My Bedroom Because Of (Fill In The Blank)

This is one of those examples that is heard a lot as a CQL Accreditation reviewer that visits with many people receiving services. When asked why people aren’t “allowed” to eat in their own bedroom a plethora of reasons are given, such as “I don’t know,” “staff said we can’t,” and “bugs.”

I love to eat in my bedroom. Some days I prefer to put Netflix on my iPad, sit in my bed, and eat popcorn. I also love to hang out in bed or in my bedroom chair and drink coffee in the morning. It’s relaxing and it is nice to have some quiet time in my private oasis. Anything that could happen by eating food in the bedroom could happen in any other room in the house. Why is the bedroom different?

## 7. Twin Beds For Grown Adults

Do we really have to talk about this? We see so many adults receiving services that are only given a twin bed to sleep on. When was the last time any of us did that as an adult? The days of sleeping on a couch, futon, or the smallest size bed made were over when I last slept in my dorm room.

## 6. When Someone “Elopes”

Interestingly, dictionary.com defines “elopement” as:

- a. an act or instance of running off secretly, as to be married
- b. an act or instance of leaving a safe area or safe premises, done by a person with a mental disorder or cognitive impairment:

Why is it different for someone with an intellectual or psychiatric disability? Why isn’t the term the same for when others without these diagnosed disabilities “leave a safe area or safe premises?” Who is to say that the person actually feels safe in the “safe area or safe premises” where they are leaving from?

It could be the only way they know how to escape from a place or situation where they don’t feel physically or emotionally safe. They may also simply be leaving to go somewhere else, rather than the sense of “escape” that the word eloping conjures up.

## 5. Chore Charts

I get it, when there are multiple people that live together the work around the house should be split amongst everyone. But when we think of chore charts, we often immediately think of children. “Get your chore done and get a sticker!” ... ugh. As adults, the sharing of household responsibilities is a good way to learn conflict resolution and teamwork. Do we need a chart to show this? Maybe. But does that chart need to be prominently displayed on a corkboard in the dining room or kitchen? Probably not.

#### **4. Being Told Not To “Steal” Food Out Of Your Own Refrigerator**

I do not know about anyone else, but when I get into my refrigerator, it’s to pick out something to eat that I bought. It is mine. One cannot steal what is theirs. Does that sound like something found in a fortune cookie?

Many times, we see behavior support plans with “targeted behaviors” that include stealing food out of the refrigerator or the pantry. And then often, this leads down a long-winding path of behavior support plans, locks in the kitchen, and so forth. These are drastic steps that do not need to be taken nearly as much as they are, because they should only be taken in extreme situations where a person’s health is at immediate risk.

#### **3. Someone Else Opening Your Mail**

If mail has someone else’s name on it, it is theirs. No one should be opening that mail except for that person, unless they have specifically stated that it is okay for someone else to open it. The fact of the matter is that so many people with disabilities do not have a lot of control over their own lives. Receiving mail and being the one to open it is such a small joy and gives a person control over their own information.

#### **2. ‘Non-Compliance’**

Why is this considered a behavioral issue? Why is it that the minute someone says “no” it becomes non-compliance? What about a person’s right to say no or the ‘right to refuse’ that people are being told they have? This is very confusing for people receiving services. Personally, I would be considered “non-compliant” because I often exercise my right to say no, and I often make the choice not to do something.

Instead of calling it ‘non-compliance,’ we should figure out why the person is saying no or choosing not to do something – and if it is vital to basic health and safety – look for alternatives for the person. We should not send mixed signals as we support people to learn about their rights and also should not tell them that ‘non-compliance’ with staff instruction is a behavioral issue that must be fixed.

#### **1. “Do You Want To Show Them Your Bedroom?”**

Do YOU want to show someone your bedroom? As CQL staff, we often visit with people where they live and one of the first things people living there are always asked by support staff is “do you want to show them your bedroom?” Why is this? I know that when people come to my house to visit, I am NOT asking them “do you want to see my bedroom?” It is such a personal space and it would feel odd to just randomly show it to someone I have never met or did not know very well. We typically shut the bedroom door when people are at our home. Now, it is a different story if someone specifically says, “would you like to see my bedroom?” If it is purely their decision to show off their space, then that is their choice.

### **Dignity And Respect: It’s Everyone’s Job**

A common courtesy is a politeness that people can usually be expected to show. The subtle signs of disrespect listed above really are common courtesies, or at least they should be. They are present in most people’s lives, so why would it be any different for someone receiving disability or mental health services? In the Capstone article “The Realities of House Rules,” the last paragraph states “you can apply the principles of your own expectations to those who are receiving services.”

On page 35 of the Personal Outcome Measures® Manual for Adults, it states “everything we do or say to people makes a statement about their perceived importance.” It is everyone’s job to lift people up and help them understand their importance and worth as a human being.