

Travelling with a disability Guideline

CBM IO | Health, Safety & Security Unit
July 2016



Guideline on travelling with a disability

This guideline was prepared in close cooperation with several CBM travellers with a disability and others who travel together with a person with a disability. Their experiences/testimonies have been collated using a series of guiding questions.

Who is this guideline for?

This guideline targets travellers with a disability and personal assistants (PA) of travellers with a disability. In addition, this document is useful for anyone who is travelling together with a person with a disability.

What is the objective of this guideline?

The aim of this guideline is to raise awareness and help to better prepare for trips. The guideline also gives first-hand advice and best-practice recommendations from persons with a disability for persons with a disability when they face challenges during their trip.

Main challenges a person with a disability may face when travelling for CBM

Booking hotels, trips, food, and taxis:

- For a person with a disability using a wheelchair, it is recommended not to ask a hotel if the rooms are accessible. The reason is that the answers might be just a "yes" or "no" answer, which means little.
- It is better to ask in detail about the facilities, and to let them describe the access. For example, one can ask if there are steps to go to the rooms, bathrooms, to the restaurant or where the elevator is located, if any. Then it can be decided if the hotel suits one's needs in terms of accessibility
- When traveling with a power chair, taxis are a challenge because it needs a taxi with a lift that can fit the power chair and the person seated on it. When using a manual chair, it is easier to use any taxi. The person in the wheelchair may ask the driver to help transferring him or her to the taxi; the driver would most likely never refuse to do so.
- Using a power chair, one need trains, buses, taxis and buildings to be more accessible. Wheelchair users always have potential challenges in restaurants with access to tables (table legs and table height prevent access to the table). The same applies to desks in hotel rooms – very few are spacious and accessible, even in so-called 'accessible' rooms, making working difficult.

Traveling by air:

- It is good to arrive at least two hours in advance to the airport to ensure time to deal with any wheelchair-related problems.
- For power chair users, it can be helpful to have a letter from the manufacturer showing that batteries are dry or gel, not at risk of spilling, and therefore safe to travel (usually needs to be approved when booking).
- It is fine to insist to stay on your own wheelchair right up to the gate, so that if there is a delay, comfort and safety are ensured.
- When traveling with crutches in high security airport clearly



show to officials that you are using crutches as, in a high tension situation, they may be mistaken for a weapon. Pass them through the x-ray machines as well.

General travel tips:

- Using bathrooms may be also an issue when traveling. Depending on the destination, it may be wise to bring a hoist along. It is important also to know the right terms or words (in the local language) or to use pictures to make sure it is understood by all.
- When staying at an accessible hotel, ensure to keep the name and address of the hotel in case of future travels in the same place.
- Carry a letter or cards with useful information written on it (local language) such as the address, the name of the destination etc.
- Always anticipate to spend a lot of time and plan for delays
- Research the area and the country setting before you plan to travel there.

"When on board an airplane ensure you store your crutches where you can easily reach them and they do not get stuck under other luggage. Or pass them to a cabin assistant."

Consider:

- The available means of transportation
- Possible discrimination which can be faced by persons with a disability.

When possible, book direct flights or with few stop overs. When this is not possible, take flights which can be rebooked and with enough time between changes/ stop overs.

Practical **Factsheets** with general travel safety advice can be provided by the CBM IO HS&S Unit.

Traveling with a personal assistant (PA)

In case a person needs a personal assistant for physical tasks or psychosocial support, a few extra issues should be considered. In the situation of an incapacitated PA (e.g. PA getting sick during travel), one could manage by asking colleagues and hotel staff for help, but depending on the location (or the skill level of support tasks) one may need to consider returning home early. It could also be organized that other people help with tasks that the PA normally does.

“Consider a self-defence training. It may be a good way to gain self-confidence and mentally prepare for trips and possible challenges regarding perception of disability and vulnerability.”

Do insurances include PA or not?

Personal Assistants should travel with their own medical, theft and repatriation insurance. Both the PA and the person with a disability should carry all details of each other's insurance (policy number and insurance 24/7 telephone number) so that if one becomes ill, the other can contact the insurance for support.

It is also worthwhile to inquire with your insurance company, before traveling, whether replacement support services of a PA are paid for and whether the insurance company could help find a replacement.

Responding to a security incident: crime or attack

It is recommended not to resist in case of an attack or theft. Let any assailant take whatever valuables they want. Your wellbeing and safety are the priority. To be able to respond to a security incident in the safest way possible, the PA and the person with a disability should partake in a CBM S&S training. When preparing for travel, spend enough time to reduce risks as much as possible. Consider risks, threats and possible additional vulnerabilities as a person with a disability (as well as mitigating measures) for each visited location. Where needed, questions in this regard can be asked during a (remote) pre-departure travel briefing with CBM IO or regional S&S staff.

Responding to an incident: fire or evacuation situation

When arriving in a hotel or a conference centre, evacuation routes, fire escape, exits, location of firefighting equipment, telephones etc. should be noted.

Staff traveling together or a person with a disability traveling with a PA should discuss how each would respond and what s/he may need during an incident.



A hearing impaired person e.g. may not hear a fire alarm or the sound of gunfire or an explosion. A visually impaired person may not see a flashing alarm light or see directions being provided with hand gestures. In your own office, regularly practice evacuation drills with colleagues especially if you need a special evacuation chair.

Responding to a natural disaster: earthquake or typhoon

Explore your direct environment (alone or with your travel companion) on arrival in an area prone to natural disasters. Make sure that you know how to safely exit a building also when there could be debris in the corridors. Where deemed useful ask hotel/conference centre staff to show you around. Also explain to hotel staff what you need in case of an emergency, e.g. when you can't get out of bed alone. Consider also that in an emergency the lights may be out and there may not be any electricity to use an elevator.

Detailed advice on this subject is provided in factsheets that can be requested from the CBM IO HS&S Unit.

Be very specific about what you need, what you expect, what you can organize for yourself and what you request others to organize for you.

When alone (in your hotel room), plan carefully to reduce the amount of external help required. But if help is needed, people are always happy to do so, if asked in the right way.

For example when you travel by train/airplane/car, be very clear what you (or your PA) organize yourselves and what you request from the host party at your destination. Don't expect things to be arranged. Carefully plan and agree. Consider things like:

- How will I get from one train/airplane into the other? What if I miss a connection?
- Do I have the numbers to call for support (announce delay) if I need help? Language? Who can I call if I need support in the evening?
- Will there be a dedicated parking place for my vehicle close to the entrance?
- Will the taxi be able to accommodate my wheelchair?

- Hotel, restaurant, lavatory accessibility during travel? Can support equipment (e.g. hoist) be arranged/rented and can these be placed in the hotel room?
- How will you or who will pay for extra services required?

After completing your travel, discuss what went well and where things should be adapted next time. Share this with the IO HS&S Unit as well. Store useful telephone numbers e.g. good taxi companies or places where you can rent equipment.

Access to medical treatment

Travellers have medical needs. Therefore, it is recommended to ensure that in each location where you travel you know the telephone number of a doctor and / or pharmacy (consider language). Also research in advance which hospital you could go to. Generally the CBM representative where you travel should be able to provide you with this.

When depending on a PA, this person should be very knowledgeable on specific medical needs of the person with disability. Having people who basically know how to stay calm and rational is an important priority as well.

Remember to have a (contextualised) first-aid kit at all times (also when not travelling) in your backpack. Ensure you have sufficient spare medication when trips unexpectedly get delayed.

What if a vital travel item disappears, is stolen / broken, or does not turn up at the airport of arrival?

Consider carrying spare parts if these are small. Carry a multi-tool, such as a *Leatherman* in your check in luggage so you can do small repairs yourself. Take sufficient time at check in to ensure vital items are packed/wrapped/sealed well so that they don't get damaged during transport. Where applicable, ask for 'fragile' stickers and mark check in pieces.

Consider calling your airline in advance to discuss your dependency on e.g. your own wheelchair and ask how it can be ensured it is handled with care and transported safely.

Most airports will be able to provide a wheelchair but for many users these are not very comfortable for using a long time.

Always carry photocopies of your and of each other's passports, vaccination certificates, insurance details and a full contact list specific to the current trip (with details of people, organizations, embassies at the destination and emergency contacts at home). It is relevant to have this as soft copy.

Ensure that everything that is essential (medication, ID, communications equipment and laptops including charge cables, plus above mentioned documents) are always carried in hand luggage.

So if main bags are lost en-route one can - in theory – survive without them and then replace missing items.

What if a carefully planned trip is interrupted, or does not go as planned?

It is important to rely on PAs or fellow travellers who are able to be calm/relaxed for travel and in stress situations. Even the best travel plans are interrupted. One should expect it and always have contingency plans for any eventualities. As long as nobody suffers, it should be treated as part of the 'joy of travel'. If it is an interruption which can have serious consequences then, until it has been dealt with, one needs to raise his/her awareness to all risks to prevent further 'derailment'.

Testimony: "I've often been lifted in and out of boats in my chair by 4-8 guys with no feeling of danger."

If any travel plans change occurs, you must inform people who are expecting to see you or hear from you.

Paying for (unexpected) costs during travel?

It is advised to carry two personal credit cards (a MasterCard and a Visa, in case one is not accepted) and where applicable, a work credit card. Also some hard currency and appropriate amount of local currency in small denominations. These are always split up and spread around the body/wheelchair/rucksack, usually in two or three places, so that if one batch is lost/ stolen you still have a back-up. The PA should do the same – s/he has his/her own credit card, his/her own money, and often carries some of the other persons' money when working.

Where possible, use hidden places on a wheelchair to virtually guarantee that a major robbery won't be a disaster (remember to remove it before giving the chair to airport staff!) Depending on hotel security, leave passports and one credit card and some cash in the hotel safe.

Changing money can also be a challenge for visually impaired persons. The best is to make sure there is a trusted person to assist and ensure there is no cheating or theft during the transactions.

Cultural perception of disability at various locations - a risk or an advantage. Share experiences and learnings.

It is common to hear that cultures in Africa for instance can see disability as a curse/punishment. However, in most cases, often in remote places, it is also common to experience great hospitality.

In fact, maybe because people are so much more used to seeing disability, in their families etc, and because they are used to having to help infirm family members (eg grandparents), people are much more likely to want to help.

This willingness to help can be good, but can also be annoying to travellers who like to be independent. It is important to be relaxed when, all of a sudden, you discover that someone has decided to grab your wheelchair and move you to where they think you want to be.

Testimony: "I have noticed that, in many developing countries, particularly in Africa, children would want to try your crutches as a game. It is better not to allow them to do so and to always forbid them to use them, even if it comes from a genuine curiosity from them...in many culture it could be seen as bringing bad luck to the child who tries for example, and the parents may react in a negative way."

On the whole, people in less-wealthy countries are more ready to physically help (lifting you over obstacles, up steps etc) and are better at it as a result. I've often been lifted in and out of boats in my chair by 4-8 guys with no feeling of danger.

An advice would be to always be polite, but firm on the type of help required. Do not be afraid to clearly describe or explain what you need. This will help other people to better support you.

Talk to other persons with disabilities that have travelled to your destination before you or that live there. Ask for advice and helpful tips. You should also share learning after your trip. When this concerns your health, safety or security always give feedback to the HS&S Unit.

How can I (and my PA) prepare for all the above mentioned challenges?

We encourage you (and your PA where applicable) to participate in a CBM S&S training. We include specific disability challenges into the training and role play components. We also have a dedicated topic on what to carry with you. Dedicated pre-departure travel briefings, with a disability inclusion component, are available from the CBM IO HS&S Unit.

When experiencing an incident or a 'near miss', talk through what went wrong and how to avoid it in the future. CBM has a dedicated crisis hotline available for its travellers caught up in a serious incident with direct support available 24/7.

Through which channel do I share learning within CBM?

Should you want to add your personal input into this document, kindly contact us by email HSSunit@cbm.org

We'd love to hear from you and incorporate what you have found to be important as a traveller with a disability or, alternatively, traveling with a person with a disability. Via this email address you can also register your interest to participate in a **Disability Inclusive S&S training** or host one in your location.



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