# Self Advocacy **Skills T**oolkit – Pan Disability

## What is self advocacy?

Self advocacy is speaking out or acting for yourself to address an issue of concern. It is the ability to understand and communicate your needs to others.

## Three parts to becoming an effective self advocate

Knowledge is the key to self advocacy, the more you know, the better you understand, and the easier it is to explain to others.

There are three parts to becoming an effective self advocate:knowing yourself, knowing your needs and knowing how to get what you need.

1. **Know yourself**

Know your skills, strengths and weaknesses

1. **Know what you need**

Learn about your disability or disabilities and how it affects you on a daily basis

1. **Know how to get what you need**

Understand your rights and how to communicate with others in a constructive way. Be assertive without coming across as angry or aggressive.

## Steps in self advocacy

### Know your rights

The best tool to have in your kit is to know your rights. You have rights whether you are a restaurant goer, a student, a traveler or going about any other aspects of your life.

Should you face barriers because of your disability, these barriers can be addressed through an organisation’s equal opportunity policy, various complaints mechanisms and under disability discrimination laws.

There are also steps you can take yourself to address the barrier.

### Acknowledge your reaction

It is normal to feel angry and hurt when you are refused service or do not have your access needs accommodated.

Firstly, acknowledge these feelings and try to put them aside so you can take a logical approach to trying to fix the problem.

If you are becoming too emotional, simply stop and take three deep breaths. It sounds corny, but it works! If you lose emotional control, you will lose your negotiating power.

As an example, Ian commented:

“I used to get very angry when something went wrong. My face would go red and I could never find the words I needed to address the situation. I now find it easier to advocate for myself. Sometimes I chat to a friend first just to make sure I am being logical and fair.”

### Pick your timing

When you are feeling stressed about a situation, it is often not the best time to act.

Take a moment to consider if you really need to address the situation immediately, or if it can wait until later.

For example, staff at a supermarket might tell you that they will not assist you with your weekly shopping, and that you should “have brought a carer with you”. Although you need to do your shopping regularly, it may not be urgent right at that time. It may be worth taking a moment – and three deep breaths! – to reflect on whether it might be better to come back the following day when you are calmer, have had some time to sleep on the issue, and can make a time to speak with the manager.

### Identify who to speak with

Identify the best person to talk with, or write to, about the situation.

Find out the person’s name, position and contact information, and note it down as soon as possible.

### Prepare your approach

Choose your battles and meter your energy!

For example, imagine going into a bank with a friend, but the teller directs their communication toward your friend rather than you. This might make you feel humiliated or annoyed. You could decide to leave the bank immediately, or you could stay and commit yourself to addressing the issue. If you decide to stay and complete your banking, you could ask the teller firmly but politely to please speak to you directly. If you decide not to address the situation immediately, you could go away and begin the process of making a complaint.

## Acting to address the problem

### Write down what happened

Include where, when, who, what and how:

* **Where** you were
* **When** it took place (noting date and time as this could be important for future steps)
* **Who** were the people involved
* **What** happened. What was said. What was done. Remember to note the content of conversations even if, on reflection, you think you might have handled the situation differently
* **How** you left matters and if anything noteworthy happened after the incident.

### Gather other perspectives

Talk to others about what happened and hear their thoughts about what you could do about the situation. You might find it helpful to discuss the issue with another person with the same access need, who may have encountered a similar scenario.

Once you have talked to others, you should consider what you want from your self advocacy efforts. You might want:

* an apology
* an agreement that the policies and practices that caused the problem are to be changed or fixed
* those involved to receive training about the needs of people with disabilities.

### Be confident!

Using the pointers in this document will help to make you a more effective self advocate, and assist you to feel confident in your ability to address the barriers you may face as a person with an access need.

## Helpful links and contact details

**Human Rights Commission**

Infoline: 0800 496 877

Fax: 09 377 3593 (Attn: Infoline)

Email: infoline@hrc.co.nz

TXT: 0210 236 4253

Website: [www.hrc.co.nz](http://www.hrc.co.nz)

**Auckland Disability Law**

Email: info@adl.org.nz

Phone: 09 257 5140

Fax: 09 275 4693

TXT: 027 457 5140

Website: [www.aucklanddisabilitylaw.org.nz](http://www.aucklanddisabilitylaw.org.nz)

**National Health and Disability Advocacy Service**

To assist you to resolve a complaint about a health or disability service.

Email: advocacy@advocacy.org.nz

Freephone: 0800 555 050

Website: [www.advocacy.org.nz](http://www.advocacy.org.nz)