

Think Before You Speak

People with disabilities

prefer to be called

“people with disabilities.”

This way, you acknowledge that they are,

indeed, people first.

People with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else—the right to fall in love, marry, hold down a job, acquire an education, etc. Above all, they have a right to self-esteem. To insure these rights, people with disabilities should be referred to in terms that acknowledge the ability, merit, and dignity of the individual. By making an effort to become sensitive to, and aware of, the language we use, we create an atmosphere of mutual respect. This brochure will give you some ideas for using “People First” language.

If you saw a person using a wheelchair unable to

negotiate the stairs of a building, would you say:

“There is a handicapped person unable to find a ramp”

or would you say: “There is a person using a wheelchair

who is handicapped by an inaccessible building”?

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

- 👉 Speak of the person first, then the disability.
- 👉 Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
 - “He uses a wheelchair.”
 - “She walks with crutches.”
- 👉 Understand that although a disability may have been caused by a disease, the disability itself is not a disease and is not contagious.
- 👉 Don't label people as part of a disability group—say “people with disabilities”, not “the disabled.”
- 👉 Don't patronize or give excessive praise or attention.
- 👉 Don't say, “Isn't it wonderful how he has overcome his disability?” People live with a disability—they have to overcome attitudinal, social, architectural, education, transportation and employment barriers—not the disability.
- 👉 Be aware that choice and independence are important. Ask a person with a disability if s/he wants assistance before you help. Your help may not be wanted or needed.
- 👉 Treat adults with disabilities as adults. Call the person by his or her first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present. Make eye contact and speak directly to the person, not a companion or interpreter. Do not give the person a nickname s/he does not usually use, say “Bill,” not “Billy.”
- 👉 Be aware of the distinction between *disability* and *handicap*:
 - A *disability* is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc.
 - A *handicap* is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person. Use handicap to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment or oneself.
- 👉 Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person to get things said or done.



TOP TEN REASONS TO IMPROVE SENSITIVITY TOWARD PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

1. Improved sensitivity means **less conflict and less chance of litigation**. Sweeping new Federal legislation greatly expands the number of people in the “protected class”.
2. **18% of adults have a disability** according to the US Census. Most of these disabilities would not be obvious to the casual observer.
3. The community of people with disabilities accounts for **\$220 Billion in discretionary income** annually, money used for vacations, cruises, cars, technology and more. Take into account friends and family and this figure soars.
4. This community is **growing at the rate of 25% per year** due to aging Boomers, increased longevity, returning veterans with disabilities and other reasons.
5. **Children’s disabilities are escalating** as medical advances save children’s lives and as syndromes like Autism escalate: 1 in 90 boys are on the Autism spectrum, and in addition nearly 5 million children have learning disabilities.
6. It’s a **passionate cohort**: one bad act on the part of an organization toward a loved one with a disability will resound, whereas one good act will anchor respect and loyalty.
7. Many **well meaning people lack the know-how** to effectively serve people with disabilities.
8. Many organizations have **documented growth in customer satisfaction** and profitability following improved service to people with disabilities.
9. Improved sensitivity means **better employee morale** as employees understand themselves and their reactions better.
10. **Improved sensitivity toward people with disabilities translates to more sensitive and skillful service for all people.**

Myths and Facts About People with Disabilities

Everybody's fighting some kind of stereotype, and people with disabilities are no exception. The difference is that barriers people with disabilities face begin with people's attitudes — attitudes often rooted in misinformation and misunderstandings about what it's like to live with a disability.

Myth 1: People with disabilities are brave and courageous.

Fact: Adjusting to a disability requires adapting to a lifestyle, not bravery and courage.

Myth 2: All persons who use wheelchairs are chronically ill or sickly.

Fact: The association between wheelchair use and illness may have evolved through hospitals using wheelchairs to transport sick people. A person may use a wheelchair for a variety of reasons, none of which may have anything to do with lingering illness.

Myth 3: Wheelchair use is confining; people who use wheelchairs are "wheelchair-bound."

Fact: A wheelchair, like a bicycle or an automobile, is a personal assistive device that enables someone to get around.

Myth 4: All persons with hearing disabilities can read lips.

Fact: Lip-reading skills vary among people who use them and are never entirely reliable.

Myth 5: People who are blind acquire a "sixth sense."

Fact: Although most people who are blind develop their remaining senses more fully, they do not have a "sixth sense."

Myth 6: People with disabilities are more comfortable with "their own kind."

Fact: In the past, grouping people with disabilities in separate schools and institutions reinforced this misconception. Today, many people with disabilities take advantage of new opportunities to join mainstream society.

Myth 7: Non-disabled people are obligated to "take care of" people with disabilities.

Fact: Anyone may offer assistance, but most people with disabilities prefer to be responsible for themselves.

Myth 8: Curious children should never ask people about their disabilities.

Fact: Many children have a natural, uninhibited curiosity and may

ask questions that some adults consider embarrassing. But scolding curious children may make them think having a disability is "wrong" or "bad." Most people with disabilities won't mind answering a child's question.

Myth 9: The lives of people with disabilities are totally different than the lives of people without disabilities.

Fact: People with disabilities go to school, get married, work, have families, do laundry, grocery shop, laugh, cry, pay taxes, get angry, have prejudices, vote, plan and dream like everyone else.

Myth 10: It is all right for people without disabilities to park in accessible parking spaces, if only for a few minutes.

Fact: Because accessible parking spaces are designed and situated to meet the needs of people who have disabilities, these spaces should only be used by people who need them.

Myth 11: Most people with disabilities cannot have sexual relationships.

Fact: Anyone can have a sexual relationship by adapting the sexual activity. People with disabilities can have children naturally or through adoption. People with disabilities, like other people, are sexual beings.

Myth 12: People with disabilities always need help.

Fact: Many people with disabilities are independent and capable of giving help. If you would like to help someone with a disability, ask if he or she needs it before you act.

Myth 13: There is nothing one person can do to help eliminate the barriers confronting people with disabilities.

Fact: Everyone can contribute to change. You can help remove barriers by:

- Understanding the need for accessible parking and leaving it for those who need it
- Encouraging participation of people with disabilities in community activities by using accessible meeting and event sites
- Understanding children's curiosity about disabilities and people who have them
- Advocating a barrier-free environment
- Speaking up when negative words or phrases are used about disability
- Writing producers and editors a note of support when they portray someone with a disability as a "regular person" in the media
- Accepting people with disabilities as individuals capable of the same needs and feelings as yourself, and hiring qualified disabled persons whenever possible

The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities

1. Speak directly rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
2. Offer to shake hands when introduced. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
3. Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when meeting someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When dining with a friend who has a visual disability, ask if you can describe what is on his or her plate.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair. Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a work animal from their job without the owner's permission.

7. Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
8. Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.
9. Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his or her attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking. If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to discriminate your speaking voice. Never shout to a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seems to relate to a person's disability.

The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities
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Disability Awareness

A Way with Words

It is important to maintain natural language when interacting with people with disabilities. Some common usages are encouraged by the World Health Organization. Useful short definitions are:

- *impairment - the functional damage*
- *disability - the restriction of normal activities*
- *handicap - the resulting social disadvantage*

Fuller descriptions are:

Impairment

This denotes any loss or abnormality of bodily function, whether physiological, psychological or anatomical.

This can include brain lesions, loss of a limb or damage to or malfunction of organs. When speaking of impairment, the accent is on the organic or medical problem.

Disability

Generally, a disability is a restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a normal manner, resulting from an impairment. The emphasis is on the practical problems faced in the performance of activities.

Handicap

Handicaps are the social, behavioural and psychological consequences of disabilities. They are the disadvantages facing the individual resulting from an impairment or disability which limits or prevents them from fulfilling a normal social role of someone of their age, sex and culture. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Services Act 1986 (DSA) provide the legislative

environment in which services to people with disabilities are delivered. Providers of goods and services should be familiar with their provisions.

When talking about people with disabilities, please keep in mind the following guidelines which promote the fair and accurate portrayal of people with disabilities.

In summary:

Avoid stereotypical or stigmatising depictions of people with disabilities.

Avoid phrases and words that demean individuals with disabilities.

Promote the "people first" concept, i.e. not "disabled person" but "person with a disability".

Portray people with disabilities in the same multidimensional fashion as others.

A Way with Words

Words to Watch

- Abnormal, subnormal (*negative terms that imply failure to reach perfection*)
- Afflicted with (*most people with disabilities don't see themselves as afflicted*)
- Birth defect, also congenital defect, deformity
- Blind (the), visually impaired (the)
- Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound (*a wheelchair provides mobility not restriction*)
- Cripple, crippled (these terms convey a negative image of a twisted, ugly body. Avoid)

Acceptable Alternative

- Specify the disability
- Say "the person has...(the disability)"
- Say "the person with a disability since birth", "person with congenital disability"
- Say "person who is blind", "person with vision impairment"
- Say "uses a wheelchair" or is a "wheelchair user"
- Say "has a physical or mobility disability"

- Deaf (the)
 - Only appropriate when referring to the Deaf community; say "person who is deaf"

- Deaf and dumb (the inability to hear and speak does not imply intellectual disability. Avoid)
 - Say "hearing impaired" ; lack of speech usually results an from impaired hearing

- Defective, deformed (degrading terms. Avoid)
 - Specify the disability

- Disabled (the)
 - Say "people with a disability"; "the disability community"

- Epileptic
 - Say "person with epilepsy"

- Fit, attack, spell
 - Say "seizure"

- Handicapped (the)
 - Say "person with a disability" unless referring to an environmental or attitudinal barrier, in such cases "person who is handicapped by a disability" is appropriate.

- Insane (also lunatic, maniac, mental patient, mentally diseased, neurotic psycho, psychotic, schizophrenic, unsound mind and others are derogatory terms. Avoid)
 - Say "person with a psychiatric disability" or a specific condition .

- Invalid (the literal sense of the word is "not valid". Avoid)
 - Say "person with a disability"

- Mentally retarded (also defective, feeble minded, imbecile, moron and retarded are offensive and inaccurate terms. Avoid)
 - Say "person with an intellectual disability"

- Mongol (outdated and derogatory)
 - Say "has Down Syndrome".

- Patient (only use in context of doctor/patient relationship or in hospital)
- Say "person with a disability".
- Physically/intellectually/vertically challenged, differently abled, (ridiculous euphemisms for disability. Avoid)
- Say "person with a disability"
- Spastic (usually refers to a person with cerebral palsy or who has uncontrollable spasms. Derogatory, often term of abuse, should never be used as a noun)
- Say "person with a disability".
- Suffers from, sufferer, stricken with (Not all people with disabilities actually suffer. These terms should not be used indiscriminately.)
- Say "person with a disability".

Taken from "A Way With Words" (1995), Community Disability Alliance, Department of Families, Youth and Community Care and Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Brisbane

Words are the only things that last forever

People with disabilities know all too well that words create opportunities or build barriers. Man or woman, adult or child, it's something they've dealt with every day of their lives.

For too long words have been used to separate and isolate people with disabilities. They've heard them all – idiot, retard, handicapped, fragile, mentally weak, weird, deformed, moron, dumbbell, brain dead, imbecile, cripple, mongoloid, spastic, feebleminded, brain damaged, drip, stupid – and on and on.

Time after time people with disabilities have been identified not as a person but as a problem. They've heard terms like afflicted with, crippled by, suffers from, and a victim of. They've been pitied or praised because of their "battle" to overcome their handicap. To paraphrase writer George Orwell, if thought corrupts language than language can corrupt thought. Put another way, the words we choose reflect our attitudes.

That's why people with disabilities prefer "people first language." What, exactly, is people first language? Simply put, people first language uses words in a way that identifies the person before their so-called problem.

A Final Word

Following are examples of the do's and don't's in the use of people first language.

One more time, put the person first when writing or speaking about people with disabilities! Stay away from labels like the blind, the deaf or the disabled. They do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. So, with all this in mind, when referring to a person with a disability...

Say or write this...

She is a person with a disability

He is an individual without a disability

They are children (kids) without disabilities

He is a person with a cognitive disability

She is an individual with autism

He needs behavior supports

She is a person with a learning disability

He uses a wheelchair

She has a physical disability

He has a brain injury

She has a congenital disability

He is a person with mental retardation

She is a person who is blind or visually impaired

He is a person who is deaf or hard of hearing

She is an individual with (or who has) multiple sclerosis or muscular dystrophy

He is a person with cerebral palsy

She is an individual with epilepsy

He is an person with a psychiatric disability

She is a person who no longer lives in an institution

He is a person who uses an assistive speech device or is unable to speak

She is handicapped or disabled

He is able-bodied

They are normal or healthy children (kids)

He is retarded

She is autistic

Instead of this!

She is handicapped or disabled

He is able-bodied

They are normal or healthy children (kids)

He is retarded

She is autistic

He has behavior problems

She is learning disabled

He is confined to a wheelchair

She is a quadriplegic or a cripple

He's brain damaged

She suffers from a birth defect

He's a retard or mentally defective

The blind

He suffers a hearing loss or from being deaf

She is afflicted by MS or MD

He is victim of CP

She is an epileptic

He is crazy, nuts, etc.

She is deinstitutionalized

says she/he has a disability

He is dumb or a mute