Talking About Disability
A Guide to Using Appropriate Language

Times have changed for people with disabilities... but language lags behind.

Life for most people with mental or physical disabilities is vastly improved over what it was twenty or thirty years ago. The Americans with Disabilities Act and other federal and state laws assure that people with disabilities have the same basic rights as people without disabilities. Some things have been slower to change; namely, attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities. Ignorance and discrimination can be serious impediments to achieving integration, productivity, and independence for people with disabilities.

The use of outdated language and words to describe people with disabilities contributes greatly to perpetuating old stereotypes. No longer should we view people with disabilities as helpless or tragic victims. Awareness is the first step toward correcting this injustice. If public opinion about people with disabilities is to be brought up to date, the public needs to hear and learn to use appropriate language. It is especially important for the media, elected officials, public speakers, and others in leadership positions to portray people with disabilities sensitively and realistically. This is a guide to using descriptive words and language when talking to or about people with disabilities.

Guidelines for Talking about Disability

1. Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant.

2. Use "disability" rather than "handicap" to refer to a person's disability. It is okay to use "handicap" to describe accessibility accommodations, such as handicap parking; but it is better to use "accessible" in those instances. It is also okay to say that a person is handicapped by obstacles, such as architectural barriers or the attitudes or ignorant or insensitive people. Never use "cripple/crippled" in any reference of disability

3. When referring to a person's disability, try to use "people first" language. In other words, it is better to say "person with a disability" or "man who has autism" rather than "a disabled person" or "an autistic man," particularly in a first reference.

4. Avoid referring to people with disabilities as "the disabled, the blind, the epileptics, the retarded, a quadriplegic," etc. Descriptive terms should be used as adjectives, not as nouns.

5. Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's disability. Don't say "suffers from," "a victim of," or "afflicted with." Don't refer to people with disabilities as "patients" unless they are receiving treatment in a medical facility.
Never say "invalid." These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities. Respect and acceptance is what people with disabilities would rather have.

6. Don't portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman. This implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.

7. Don't use "normal" to describe people who don't have disabilities. It is better to say "people without disabilities" or "typical," if necessary to make comparisons.

8. Never say "wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair." People who use mobility or adaptive equipment are, if anything, afforded freedom and access that otherwise would be denied them.

9. Never assume that a person with a communication disorder (speech impediment, hearing loss, motor impairment) also has a cognitive disability, such as mental retardation. On the other hand, people with mental retardation often speak well.

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**Rules for Appropriate Language**

Use the terms person with a disability; has a disability; people with disabilities; have disabilities. Avoid the terms: disabled person; the disabled; the handicapped, invalids, patients, crippled, deformed, or defective.

Use the terms people without disabilities; typical person. Avoid the terms normal, healthy, or able-bodied.

Use the terms wheelchair user or uses a wheelchair. Avoid the terms wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair.

Use the terms congenital disability or birth anomaly. Avoid the terms birth defect or affliction.

Use the terms has cerebral palsy (CP) or other condition. Avoid the term a victim of cerebral palsy.

Use the terms has had polio; experienced polio; or has a disability as a result of polio. Avoid the terms suffers from polio; afflicted with polio, or post-polios (as a noun referring to people).

Use the terms people who have mental retardation (MR); or person with mental retardation. Avoid the terms "the mentally retarded"; mentally deficienta retardate; a retard (never); or a feeble-minded person.

Use the terms child with a developmental delay (DD); or person with a developmental disability. Avoid the term slow.
Use the term person with Down Syndrome. Avoid the terms the Down's person or Mongoloid (never).

Use the terms person who has epilepsy people with seizure disorders seizure or epileptic episode or event. Avoid the terms the epileptic (to describe a person); the epileptics fits; or epileptic fits.

Use the term people who have mental illness person with a mental or emotional disorder. Avoid the terms the mentally ill, crazy, psycho, or mental case (never).

Use the terms people who are blind; visually impaired; person who is hard of hearing; person who is deaf; or the Deaf (Deafness is a cultural phenomenon and should be capitalized in those instances.) Avoid the terms the blind-hearing impaired (translates as "broken hearing" in sign language), deaf-mute, or deaf and dumb.

Use the term speech or communication disability. Avoid the term tongue-tied, or mute.