Don’t dis me with that language — The disability language A–Z guide

A
Ability
It’s important to remember, when communicating with or about people with a disability, that they may have one disability — but they have many abilities. Try to highlight their abilities.

A haemophiliac, an epileptic, a paraplegic
This use of ‘a’ before the noun implies that once you know the condition, you can categorise the person solely based on their disability. Instead use person with haemophilia; woman with epilepsy; a man who has paraplegia.

Abnormal / sub-normal
Not acceptable. Use people/person with a disability.

B
Blind
Use only to describe a person who really is blind. Otherwise person with a vision impairment is preferred.

C
Carer
Should be reserved for the ‘family’ of a person with a disability who provide unpaid support. Paid workers should be referred to as assistants, attendants or care workers.

Challenged
Euphemisms, such as intellectually challenged, are seen as ‘overly’ politically correct. Don’t use them.

Confined to a wheelchair
A wheelchair is not confining, it provides mobility to those who can’t walk. A person uses a wheelchair.

Cripple
Should only be used as part of a direct quote, as part of an organisation’s name — or by Steady Eddie!

D
Deaf
Many people who are unable to hear identify themselves as belonging to a group with its own language and culture. In such cases a capital ‘D’ is used when referring to this group, eg. A Deaf spokesperson said...

Use if a person really is Deaf. In other cases person with a hearing impairment is preferred.

Defect
Not acceptable. Use congenital disability, blind from birth etc.

Despite
People with a disability are active in their community because of their abilities, not despite their disability.

Disabled
Emphasises the disability not the person. Use people/person with a disability.

Disabled toilet / disabled parking space
We all know what is meant, but the toilet or car park is not disabled — it is an inaccurate description, use accessible toilet/accessible parking space.

Disadvantaged
Don’t use to describe a person just because they have a disability — a disability in itself needn’t be a disadvantage (although often society’s response to a person’s disability can be a disadvantage).

Putting people first

Society today has made clear that most disapprove of derogatory terms about people with a disability. However there are still some insidious terms being used in everyday conversations, and most of us are unaware of the harm they can do to people’s self esteem.

Many of us may not even be aware of the language people with a disability consider to be appropriate. For example, “people with a disability”, or “person with a disability” are considered much more preferable than “the disabled” — which ignores the vital reality that we are all people first!

Here are a few language dos and don’ts and communication tips to think about next time you are talking to, or about, a person with a disability.
**E**
**Euphemisms**

‘Nice’ terms such as **intellectually challenged, differently abled, physically challenged** are a denial of reality.

**F**
**Fits**

The preferred term is seizures.

**H**
**Handicap**

Don’t use to describe a disability, however this term can be used to describe the obstacles that restrict an individual’s participation, eg. Handicapped by lack of accessible transport.

**I**
**Intellectual disability**

Terms such as **Mongol, retard or mentally retarded** are frowned upon. Use **people with an intellectual disability**.

**Invalid**

An outdated term with negative connotations. Use **person with a disability**.

**M**
**Mental illness**

Preferred over mentally disabled. Alternatively use the appropriate clinical name, eg. Person with schizophrenia. Do not use **insane, lunatic, mad, crazy**.

**Mongolism**

Use **person with Down Syndrome**.

**N**
**Normal**

This is a statistical term. In order to distinguish from people with a disability it is acceptable to use double negatives such as **non-disabled or person without a disability** or descriptive terms such as **sighted, hearing, ambulant**.

**P**
**Paranoid schizophrenia**

This is a specific condition and these terms should not be used to make a person sound more colourful or dramatic.

**Patient**

Should only be used when a person is actually receiving medical care or treatment, or in hospital. At other times use the same adjective as you would for a person without a disability, eg **client, consumer, customer, commuter, visitor, patron**.

**Patronising language**

Don’t describe people as brave, special or suffering just because they have a disability.

**People with a disability**

While this is the preferred phrase it can be cumbersome and linguistically limiting. Variations can be used such as **Victorian with a disability, driver with a disability or mother with a disability**.

**People with disabilities**

Can imply only people with more than one disability. Use **people with a disability**.

**Politically correct**

If in doubt make sure you are politically correct by using **people with a disability**. Don’t use euphemisms like **physically challenged or differently abled**.

**Psychiatric disability**

An acceptable term to describe a mental illness. Alternatively use the appropriate clinical name eg. **Person with schizophrenia**. Do not use **insane, lunatic, mad, crazy**.

**R**
**Retarded**

Derogatory, outdated and unacceptable – instead use **people with an intellectual disability**.

**S**
**Spastic**

Derogatory, outdated and unacceptable, unless as part of an organisation’s name. In most cases **person with cerebral palsy** is the acceptable alternative.

**Sufferer**

Avoid using to indiscriminately describe a person with a disability – individuals don’t suffer just because they have a disability. Alternatives include **survivor or person with a disability**.

**T**
**The blind, the deaf**

Avoid using ‘the’ in this manner as it unconsciously eliminates the person and creates a generalisation based purely on disability.

**U**
**Uses a wheelchair**

Do not say confined to a wheelchair – a wheelchair provides mobility and is liberating, not confining. Say **uses a wheelchair**.

**V**
**Vegetables**

Vegetables are what you cook and eat – not to be confused with **people who are comatose, unconscious or in a coma**.

**Victim**

Some people are victims of war, crime, or exploitative wages. It is inappropriate to describe people as victims of a particular disability.

**Visual impairment**

Implies a person who is unattractive to look at! Use **vision impairment or sight impairment**.

---

The NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care would like to thank **Link Disability Magazine** ([www.linkonline.com.au](http://www.linkonline.com.au)) for developing and allowing us to adapt their list.