

Don't DIS
my ABILITY

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY
3 DECEMBER

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



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. ■

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).

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) for developing and allowing us to adapt their list.