

Communication Strategies

What's in a word?

The words we use to describe one another can have an enormous impact on the perceptions we have of one another, our treatment of one another, our mutual expectations, and how we make people feel welcome.

Below are some helpful tips when you speak with — and about — a person with a disability. While this information can be helpful, keep these things in mind:

- If you are unsure of the proper term or language to use, it is usually best to ask. Asking relays the message that you respect that person and are interested in addressing them appropriately.
- The best way to refer to someone with a disability is the same way we all like to be referred to: by name.
- All currently accepted terms should be used with “people first” language — in other words, “people with...” or “person with...” The exception to this are “deaf people” and “Deaf community,” which are fine.

General Tips

Outdated or Offensive Language	Reason(s)	Currently Accepted*
Using "The" to begin description of a person with a particular disability. For example: The blind, The disabled, The autistic	Views people in terms of their disability; Groups people into one undifferentiated category; Condescending; Does not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities	People with disabilities Deaf people People who are blind People who are visually impaired People with autism
Handicapped	Outdated; connotes that people with disabilities need charity Disabilities don't handicap: Attitudes and architecture handicap	People with disabilities
The disabled	An individual is a person before one is disabled. People with disabilities are individuals who share a common condition.	People with disabilities
Admits she/he has a disability	Disability is not something people admit to or needs to be admitted to	Says she/he has a disability
Normal, healthy, whole (when speaking about people without disabilities as compared to people with disabilities)	People with disabilities may also be normal, healthy, and whole Implies that the person with a disability isn't normal	Non-disabled Person without a disability
"Courageous"	Implies person has courage because of having a disability	Has overcome his/her disability Successful, Productive

Specific Disabilities & Conditions

Outdated or Offensive Language	Reason(s)	Currently Accepted*
		Deaf
Deaf and dumb	Implies mental incapacitation; Simply because someone is deaf does not mean that they cannot speak	Non-verbal
Dumb		Hard of hearing
Deaf-mute		Person who does not speak
		Unable to speak
Hearing impaired	Negative connotation of "impaired," "suffers"	Uses synthetic speech
Suffers a hearing loss		Deaf
Slurred speech	Stigmatizing	Hard of hearing
Unintelligible speech		Person/people with a communication disability
		People with slow speech
Confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchairs don't confine; they make people mobile	Uses a wheelchair
Wheelchair-bound		Wheelchair user
		Person who uses a wheelchair
Cripple	From Old English, meaning "to creep"; Was also used to mean "inferior"	Has a disability
Crippled		Physical disability
Deformed	Dehumanizing	Physically disabled
Freak	Connotes repulsiveness, oddness	Multiple disabilities
Vegetable	Dehumanizing	Severe disabilities
Crazy	Stigmatizing	Behavior disorder
Insane		Emotional disability
Psycho	Considered offensive	Person with mental illness
	Reinforces negative stereotypes	

Maniac		Person with a psychiatric disability
Nut Case		
Retarded		
Retardate		
Mentally defective		
Slow	Stigmatizing; Implies that a person cannot learn	Developmentally delayed Developmental disability
Simple		
Moron		
Idiot		
Mongoloid	Considered offensive	Person with Down syndrome
Stricken/afflicted by MS	Negative connotation of "afflicted," "stricken"	Person who has multiple sclerosis
CP victim	Cerebral palsy does not make a person a "victim"	Person with cerebral palsy
Epileptic	Not "person-first" language; Stigmatizing	Person with epilepsy Person with seizure disorder
Fit	Reinforces negative stereotypes	Seizure
Birth defect	Implies there was something wrong with the birth	Congenital disability
Deinstitutionalized	Stigmatizing; Groups people into one category Not focused on the individual	Person who used to live in an institution
Midget	Outdated term; Considered offensive	Person of short stature