

Disability Language: The Right Words

A Common-sense
Guide of What
to Say and Do



Using proper language is more than
being just politically correct.

- It helps portray people accurately.
- It raises public awareness.
- It helps break down attitudinal barriers and negative stereotypes.

What's the Difference?

Disability is a general term used for a functional limitation that interferes with a person's physical, sensory, or mental ability. For example, loss of hearing, paralysis from the neck down.

Impairment refers to a loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism that may result in disability. For example, mobility impairment due to paralysis or hearing impairment from nerve damage.

Handicap is not a synonym for "disability." It's a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or people themselves. For example, a building that only has stairs is a handicap for someone with a mobility impairment.

- Avoid grouping people with disabilities. For example, don't say "the disabled," "the deaf," or "the blind."
- Put people first! Disability is secondary. Don't refer to someone by his or her disability: "an epileptic," "an amputee," etc.
- Focus on abilities.
- Avoid stereotyping people with disabilities as poor, superhuman, courageous, or unfortunate.

Say:

- Person with a disability (people with disabilities).
- Person with
- Person who is deaf.
- Person with a learning disability.
- Person who has
- Person who uses a wheelchair.
- Person with mental illness.
- Person who has Down syndrome.

Do not say:

- Patient, cripple, handicap, invalid.
- Victim of, stricken with, afflicted with
- Deaf, mute, deaf and dumb.
- Fits, spastic.
- Slow.
- Mongoloid.
- Confined (or bound or restricted) to a wheelchair.
- Normal (implies that people with disabilities are abnormal).
- Crazy, insane, deranged.
- Retard, imbecile, moron.
- Birth defect.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words!

Don't:

- ...assume that a person with a disability also has other disabilities.
For example, a person who uses a wheelchair does not necessarily have a hearing impairment.
- ...discourage children from asking questions.
- ...make assumptions about what people can and cannot do.
- ...be afraid to help because you fear doing or saying the wrong thing.
- ...be overly conscious of a person's disability.
- ...lean on or push a wheelchair without asking first.

Do:

- ...offer assistance, but don't insist on helping.
- ...check accessibility when planning events.
- ...let the person with a disability set the pace in walking or talking.
- ...speak directly to the person in a normal tone of voice.
- ...offer to shake hands.

...If you anticipate a lengthy conversation with someone in a wheelchair, pull up a chair to get on the same level.

Be yourself...and use common sense!