

Respectful Disability Language*

What do we mean by “Respectful Disability Language”?

The use of outdated language to describe people with disabilities reinforces negative established stereotypes. We can take the first step toward correcting this injustice by being aware of the words we choose when we communicate.

This is a guide to using appropriate language when talking to or about people with disabilities.

Why is language an issue for people with disabilities?

Language = Power

The medical, legal, media, and other professions have created words that describe people with disabilities in a negative manner. These words are still used in many settings and we hear them almost every day. The words used lead to unwanted sympathy or pity toward individuals with disabilities. Unfortunately, the damage caused by insensitive language doesn't stop there. It also causes many people with disabilities to engage in internalized oppression (i.e., believing society's messages that people with disabilities are unable to do things for themselves and therefore must constantly rely on others or government systems for support).

Disability is a part of human diversity. Just like everyone else, people with disabilities should be respected and valued. By carefully choosing our words and using respectful language, we can dramatically change our communities and the future for the better.

Some Guidelines for Talking about Disability

- Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant. For example, don't ask “What's wrong with you?” or refer to the “girl in the wheelchair.”
- People that do not identify or see themselves as disabled should use people-first language when referring to a person with a disability. Doing so

demonstrates that we understand and are being respectful. People who do identify or see themselves as people with disabilities may choose to use disabled-first language.

- Never use "cripple/crippled," "handicapped" or "special needs" when talking about disability, in general or when referring to a particular person.
- When referring to parking spaces or bathroom stalls specifically made for people with disabilities who have placards, say "accessible" or "disabled" parking and "accessible" or "disabled" stall.
- Don't portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special or super human. This makes it sound like it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents, skills or to live life like everyone else.
- Don't use "normal" to describe people who don't have disabilities. It is better to say "people without disabilities" or "non-disabled people" if necessary to make comparisons.

Outdated Language

Words you should **NOT** use describing or talking about a person with a disability:

- Handicapped, physically challenged, special
- Crazy, insane
- Cripple, cripp, gimp, lame
- Retarded, slow
- Victim, stricken
- Wheelchair bound, confined
- Brain damaged
- Midget
- Invalid, dumb, deaf mute
- Deformed
- Psychotic
- Mentally challenged
- Spastic, spaz
- Suffers from (an illness or disability)

Respectful Disability Language

Words you **SHOULD** use when describing or talking about a person with a disability:

- mental health disability
- emotional disability
- cognitive disability
- intellectual disability
- developmental disability
- learning disability
- non-apparent disability
- Wheelchair user
- Person who has low vision
- Person who is...
 - deaf
 - hard of hearing
 - blind
 - of short stature
- Person with a disability (use people-first language)
- Person with a(n)...
psychiatric disability

