

Including People with Disabilities

by Laura Grunfeld

Get Hip to the Lingo!



People often say to me “Is it okay to say ‘handicapped’? I’ve heard that I shouldn’t but I don’t know what else to say when I want to reference ‘handicapped’ people.” Language is ever changing and we all want to be respectful so let’s talk about the current thinking on the topic. Keep in mind that particular individuals may prefer different lingo and conventions may differ in various regions and countries. Follow the lead of the person with the disability and ask if you are not sure.

Most importantly it is best to simply use a person’s name and only mention a person’s disability if it is pertinent to the conversation. When the disability is being discussed it is most often best to use what is known as People-First Language. However, some individuals and advocacy groups prefer Identity-First Language. Let me explain.

People-First Language (PFL): The basic idea of PFL is to get away from identifying people as their disability and to put the person first rather than the condition. For example, rather than saying, “Judy is a disabled person,” or “Judy is disabled,” as if that was the most important thing to know about her, say “Judy is a person with a disability,” or “Judy has a disability.” The person comes first and she has the condition, rather than she IS the condition. Unless an individual tells you otherwise, PFL is considered the default lingo with the following few exceptions.

Identity-First Language (IFL): Those who prefer IFL feel that PFL implies that there is something negative or shameful about the condition or disability. They believe that the disability is simply a part of who the person is and there is no reason to de-emphasize it. Members of Deaf culture are outspoken advocates for using IFL and refer to each other and themselves as Deaf with a capital D. “Craig is Deaf. I am Deaf.” It gets a little tricky with people who are blind or people who have autism. One person might favor PFL while another chooses IFL. For instance, the parents of a child with autism may prefer PFL as they don’t want their child identified as their disability, but the child may refer to themselves using IFL, “I am autistic,” as they feel it is a part of themselves they cannot change.

About “handicapped,” no, that’s not a term we want to use any more. There are quite a few terms that have become

outdated, offensive or even hurtful. Read through this handy chart. Be sensitive to what individuals care about. For some, the words don’t matter. Others are very particular. Open your mind and heart.

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FIRST CHOICE: PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE	
Avoid	Recommended
Handicapped, challenged, disabled, crippled, handicapable, differently-abled, paralyzed. These words invoke pity, imply the person is broken.	People with disabilities. Henry uses crutches to get around. Walter is living with a mobility disability. Anna has paralysis.
Handicapped parking, toilet, etc.	Accessible parking, accessible toilet, etc.
Wheelchair bound. A wheelchair gives freedom and mobility; it is not constraining.	Jacob uses a wheelchair. People who use wheelchairs.
Electric chair.	Powered or motorized chair.
Spells, fits.	Fiona has epilepsy. Tad has a seizure disorder.
Speech impairment, speech impediment.	Shawn has a speech disability.
Is mentally ill, insane, emotionally disturbed, demented, crazy. The person is not these things. The person has a disability.	Person with an emotional or behavioral disability. Person diagnosed with a mental health or psychiatric disability. Jen has an anxiety disorder.
Retarded. Referred to as “the R word,” this is a very offensive word and there is never a time to use it. The R word may be applied to various types of disabilities.	Percy has an intellectual disability. The truck driver has a learning disability. The bartender has a cognitive disability. Carol has a developmental disability. Ella has Down syndrome.
Midget. Very offensive. From the days of side shows.	People with dwarfism. Brenda has dwarfism. Alex is a person of short stature. Little person.
Hidden or invisible disability. Implies concealing something.	People may have apparent or non-apparent disabilities. Ben has a non-apparent disability.
Is special, has special needs, is differently abled. Condescending and discriminatory. Being special often means being treated differently.	Don't point out differences. Kids (and adults), don't want to be special or different. Be inclusive.
Is a victim of, suffers from, struggles with, stricken with, has a problem with. Invokes pity, stresses the negative.	Talk about the solution, not the problem. Pat uses a walker. Leave out the negative descriptors. The professor is diagnosed with bipolar disorder.
Is inspirational, brave, courageous. Many people with disabilities find it offensive to be considered inspirational just because of their disability.	A person may be inspirational because of their skills, abilities, or accomplishments. I am inspired by Cora's ski-jumping skills.
Normal, typical, healthy. Implies that a person with disabilities is abnormal, atypical, unhealthy.	Person without disabilities.
FIRST CHOICE: IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE	
Avoid	Recommended
Hearing impaired, suffers a hearing loss, deaf and dumb, mute. Culturally Deaf persons are staunch advocates for IFL.	IFL: “Deaf” and “hard of hearing” are accepted terms. The word Deaf is capitalized when referring to people who identify as being part of the Deaf culture. Stan is Deaf. Paula is hard of hearing. Deaf is spelled with a lowercase d when referencing a person's audiological condition. Bret is deaf but does not identify with Deaf culture.
LET THE PERSON LEAD	
Avoid	Recommended
Visually challenged, visually impaired. Many, but not all, blind persons prefer IFL.	IFL: Blind person. The blind. Zoe is blind. PFL: Person who is blind. Jack has low vision.
Many autism advocates endorse the use of IFL but some prefer PFL.	IFL: Autistic person. Dave is autistic. PFL: Person with autism. Sally is diagnosed with autism. Toby has an autism spectrum disorder.