

# Disability: Communicating with people with disabilities.



### Introduction

Disability is diverse both in terms of conditions and the people who have them. In fact, the differences of culture, language, gender, belief, and environment make it possible for two people with the same diagnosis or circumstance to feel completely differently about their disability.

### Discussion

Some disabilities are clearly evident, but others are not. Some people are willing to disclose their (invisible) disability, while others are not. It is important to note that individuals might want different levels of disclosure. If people are willing to disclose their disabilities, it is best to ask them if and how they want you to acknowledge their disability. In other words, some people may feel more comfortable discussing their disabilities than others or may feel differently about disclosure in certain situations. By shying away from mentioning disability, we might reinforce the notion that it is something shameful.

The language we use can also be problematic. Terms like differently-abled, challenged, and handi-capable are often considered condescending. However, the word special is particularly entrenched because, while it can be used as a euphemism, it is acceptable when used to describe activities such as special education, special Olympics, and so on.

It is always best to avoid offensive language - even when used as a joke. Examples of offensive terms are 'mad', 'freak', 'psycho', 'retard', 'lame', 'imbecile', 'crazy'. Do not call someone 'a retard' or 'retarded' if they do something unwise or thoughtless. Other examples include asking someone jokingly, 'Are you deaf/blind?' or 'Can't you see/hear?'.

Below are some examples of acceptable, 'people first' terms that one should keep in mind when referring to persons with disabilities; there are many more.

Acceptable	Unacceptable
Able bodied	Normal
People with disabilities	handicapped, disabled people, deformed
Person who uses a wheelchair	Crippled, wheelchair bound
Person with an intellectual disability	Mentally retarded, abnormal
Person with cerebral palsy	Spastic, cerebral palsied
Person with Down's Syndrome	Mongoloid
Person with albinism	Albino

### Be mindful:

- Be mindful of the diversity in the disability community.
- Ask individuals what language they would like used to describe their disability.

- Avoid condescending euphemisms.
- Avoid offensive language - even as a joke.
- Do not use words that suggest undesirable stereotypes of people with disability.
- When describing people without disabilities, don't use terms like normal, healthy, able-bodied. Instead, use non-disabled or people without visible disabilities.
- Not all disabilities are illnesses and not all people with disabilities are patients.
- People with disabilities are simply living their lives. They do not exist to inspire others, so be aware of over emphasizing the challenges people with disabilities might face.

The most important thing to remember is that respect and kindness can overshadow ignorance.

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### References

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