

# Disability: The power of language.

NID Training Disability Diary

- Compiled by Dr Jean Mitchell



## Introduction

Language is powerful and dynamic; it changes with social norms and opinions and can be a means to include or exclude members of society. When language is disrespectful, mocking, or suggests intolerance, it can be hurtful and even destructive. Terms used to refer to people with disabilities (PWD) often tend to be derogatory and, as such, affect society's perceptions of, and attitudes and behaviour towards PWD. They also affect the self-image of individuals (Back et al., 2016), and establish unnecessary power structures.

## Discussion

The merits of the medical and social models of disability are often debated. Each model carries with it a framework of language to refer to disability. In the medical model,

disability is seen as a health problem to be pitied and fixed. An individual is restricted and 'not normal' because of an impairment or disability (Mapepa & Magano, 2018). In this model, the language used to refer to disabilities and PWD tends to be impersonal. On the other hand, in the social model, disabilities are seen as socially constructed and result in oppression and exclusion, thus language used to refer to conditions and individuals is more humane. People with disabilities often experience their disability being emphasised over their humanity and abilities. Negative descriptions, stereotypes, discourteous and damaging labels prevent PWD from being fully integrated into society, but people-first language aims to reflect positive attitudes and promote inclusion. Many use this style of language to celebrate their pride in and identification with disability.

## Conclusion

Language use is especially relevant when we try to understand the experiences of students and employees with disabilities who are attempting not only to engage with their peers, but also to learn or work. Although not all PWD share a uniform preference of language style, it is important to use respectful and inclusive language when communicating with or talking about PWD (Rahman, 2019).

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