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Guidance

Inclusive language: words to use and avoid when writing about disability

Updated 15 March 2021

Contents

1. [Language guidelines](#)
2. [Words to use and avoid](#)
3. [Some tips on behaviour](#)



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Consider these guidelines when communicating with or about disabled people.

1. Language guidelines

Not everyone will agree on everything but there is general agreement on some basic guidelines.

1.1 Collective terms and labels

The word 'disabled' is a description not a group of people. Use 'disabled people' not 'the disabled' as the collective term.

However, many deaf people whose first language is BSL consider themselves part of 'the deaf community' – they may describe themselves as 'Deaf', with a capital D, to emphasise their deaf identity.

Avoid medical labels. They say little about people as individuals and tend to reinforce stereotypes of disabled people as 'patients' or unwell.

Don't automatically refer to 'disabled people' in all communications – many people who need disability benefits and services don't identify with this term. Consider using 'people with health conditions or impairments' if it seems more appropriate.

1.2 Positive not negative

Avoid phrases like 'suffers from' which suggest discomfort, constant pain and a sense of hopelessness.

Wheelchair users may not view themselves as 'confined to' a wheelchair – try thinking of it as a mobility aid instead.

1.3 Everyday phrases

Most disabled people are comfortable with the words used to describe daily living. People who use wheelchairs 'go for walks' and people with visual impairments may be very pleased – or not – 'to see you'. An impairment may just mean that some things are done in a different way.

Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example 'deaf to our pleas' or 'blind drunk'.

2. Words to use and avoid

Avoid passive, victim words. Use language that respects disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives.

Avoid	Use
(the) handicapped, (the) disabled	disabled (people)
afflicted by, suffers from, victim of	has [name of condition or impairment]
confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	wheelchair user

Avoid	Use
mentally handicapped, mentally defective, retarded, subnormal	with a learning disability (singular) with learning disabilities (plural)
cripple, invalid	disabled person
spastic	person with cerebral palsy
able-bodied	non-disabled
mental patient, insane, mad	person with a mental health condition
deaf and dumb; deaf mute	deaf, user of British Sign Language (BSL), person with a hearing impairment
the blind	people with visual impairments; blind people; blind and partially sighted people
an epileptic, diabetic, depressive, and so on	person with epilepsy, diabetes, depression or someone who has epilepsy, diabetes, depression
dwarf; midget	someone with restricted growth or short stature
fits, spells, attacks	seizures

3. Some tips on behaviour

- use a normal tone of voice, don't patronise or talk down
- don't be too precious or too politically correct – being super-sensitive to the right and wrong language and depictions will stop you doing anything
- never attempt to speak or finish a sentence for the person you are talking to
- address disabled people in the same way as you talk to everyone else
- speak directly to a disabled person, even if they have an interpreter or companion with them

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