



Mind Your Language

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Words are powerful. Solomon declares that, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). Our words have the power to build up and to tear down - to elevate or to deflate. When speaking to or about people with disabilities, we are often wary of saying the wrong thing. This is especially the case in the current culture where it is all too easy to offend when no offence is intended. The fear of committing unintentional microaggressions can foster the kind of hyper-vigilance that leads us to disengage and avoid.

The appropriate use of language is an ever-present challenge. As cultures change, so do the words and phrases that are deemed to be acceptable. Consider the history of words and phrases used to describe people with learning difficulties. The terms 'simpleton', 'moron', 'imbecile', 'idiot', 'feeble-minded' and 'retarded' were all socially acceptable at some point until society rejected them as insulting, prejudicial and discriminatory. These shifting norms are some of the reasons older versions of the Bible fall foul of the scrutiny of political correctness.

The task of using 'correct' language is further complicated by the fact that consensus does not always exist even among people with disabilities. The question of whether we should use 'people-first' or 'disability-first' language, is a case in point. Should it be 'autistic person' or 'person with autism'? Many people with autism prefer 'autistic person' because they own their autism as an integral part of their identity. Others view 'autistic' as a label. We can honour people by asking them their preference. On the whole, person-first language stresses the humanity of the individual and avoids objectification which is why we should avoid using the article "the" with a specific disability (i.e. 'the blind').

In general, when referring to people with disabilities, it is preferable to use language that focuses on their abilities rather than their disabilities. Therefore, the use of the terms 'handicapped,' 'able-bodied,' 'physically challenged,' and 'differently abled' are discouraged. Terms like 'wheelchair-bound' can communicate a negative mindset when, as one wheelchair user stated, "My wheelchair liberates me."

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Never use the word 'normal' to refer to people who do not have a disability in contrast to people with disabilities. Use a term like 'non-disabled' instead. Be wary of implying that people with disabilities deserve to be pitied, feared, or avoided. Terms like 'victim' or 'sufferer' should not be used to refer to people who have a disability or disease as this can be dehumanizing and implies powerlessness. We should also not portray people with disabilities as somehow more heroic, courageous, patient, or 'special' than others who do not have a disability.

One thing is guaranteed - we will make mistakes. When that happens, simply apologise and move on. Despite the challenges, Paul's counsel in Colossians 3:8 serves as a guiding principle, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." Proverbs 15:23 indicates the need to be proactive in our communication stating that, "The heart of the righteous studies how to answer." Solomon also highlights the potential of our words, asserting that, "the tongue of the wise brings healing" Proverbs 12:18.

Language and Disability

Acceptable Terms	Unacceptable Terms
Person – person with a disability	Cripple, crippled –The image conveyed is of a twisted, deformed, useless body
Disability – a general term used for functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability. for example, to hear, walk, learn, or lift, It may refer to a physical, mental, or sensory condition.	Cerebral palsied, spinal cord injured, etc. Never identify people solely by their disability
Person who has had a spinal cord injury, polio, a stroke, etc., or a person who has multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, etc.	Defective, defect, deformed, vegetable – These words are offensive, dehumanizing, degrading, and stigmatizing
Deafness/hearing impairment – "Deafness" refers to a person who has a total loss of hearing. "Hearing impairment" refers to a person who has a partial loss of hearing within a range from slight to severe.	Deaf and dumb –This is as bad as it sounds. Inability to hear or speak does not indicate less intelligence
Person who has a mental or developmental disability. Person with a mental health condition Person with learning difficulties. Person with a communication disorder	Retarded, moron, imbecile, idiot –These are offensive to people who bear the label
Uses a wheelchair or crutches; a wheelchair user; walks with crutches.	Confined/restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
Able to walk, see, hear, etc.: people who are not disabled. Non-disabled	Healthy –When used to contrast with "disability," "healthy" implies the person with a disability is unhealthy. Many people with disabilities have excellent health
People who do not have a disability or non-disabled	Normal –When used as the opposite of "disabled," implies the person is abnormal. No one wants to be label abnormal
A person who has (name the disability). Example: A person who has multiple sclerosis	Afflicted with/suffers from – Most people with disabilities don't regard themselves as afflicted or suffering continually. A disability is not an affliction; an affliction may have caused a disability
Seizures	Fits, attacks, spells
Accessible toilets/parking	Disabled-friendly toilets/parking
Little person, person of short stature, person with restricted growth	Dwarf (acceptable in some contexts), midget
Person with a brain injury	Brain-damaged
Congenital disability	Birth defect