

The art of respectful language

Impairment and disability: a world of difference

Disabled people use the term 'impairment' to talk about their medical condition or diagnosis or description of their functioning. On the other hand, 'disability' describes the social effects of impairment.

'Disability' is not a description of a personal characteristic. A disabled person is not a 'person with a disability' as the person does not *own* the disability in the way that you might be 'a person with brown hair'. Consequently, the opposite of 'disabled' is not 'able-bodied' or 'abled', but 'non-disabled' or 'enabled'.

Understanding the critical difference between these two terms allows us to talk separately and clearly about:

- a named individual = the **person**
- impairment = their **functioning**
- disability = society's **barriers**

e.g. Fred Brown (the *person*) is a man with cerebral palsy (the *impairment*). When the barriers and discrimination (the *disabilities*) that restrict Fred have been removed from society, Fred will no longer be disabled, but he will still have cerebral palsy and be called Fred.

"Disability... the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities".

(Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976)

<p>Examples of Impairment</p>	<p>Quadriplegia Polio Cerebral palsy Blindness Depression Deafness</p>
<p>Examples of Disability</p>	<p>Buildings without ramps Poor health provision Bullying, name-calling Segregated education Workplaces without lifts</p>

Disability: a social oppression

Disability, then, is a complex and powerful social force. The disabling effects of society present disabled people with far greater problems than those caused by their impairments.

If change is to happen, it is essential that we understand disability as an instrument of social oppression. We need to acknowledge that such oppression occurs and that disabled people are subject to the very real effects of other peoples' attitudes and beliefs. Different cultures have different attitudes to the disabled people in their communities. Whether these attitudes are positive or negative, they will influence people's expectations of a disabled individual.

Just as racism, sexism and classism all promote stereotypes, so disability is manifested in negative attitudes and false stereotypes that lead to prejudice. Unlike sexism or racism, however, you won't find disablism in the dictionary. Yet it describes an all-too-real issue - discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others. 'Institutional disablism' describes a whole organisation's disablist attitudes, practice and culture.

(Miller, P., Gillinson, S. and Parker, S, (Demios, Scope & DAA 2004) **Disablism: How to Tackle the Last Prejudice.**)

We must be willing to challenge our own stereotypes and prejudices about disabled people. Just as we would challenge racist behaviour in an office situation, or when imagining the careers and life paths of women, we must not allow our own stereotypes to limit our expectation of their achievement. If we fail to challenge our own prejudices then we internalise them.

Disabled people, of course have heard and felt these negative attitudes and stereotypes throughout their lives, and so naturally tend to internalise them too. This directly affects the way they perceive themselves, and is likely to limit their expectations. We might not be talking about violence, exclusion or alienation, but for some of the lack of choice, the lack of encouragement to express free will, ideas, and dreams begins a vicious circle of dependence. In turn, this influences wider cultural phenomena such as the oppression, segregation and violence made acceptable by certain medical interventions such as the late abortion of disabled foetuses.

We must be aware of this negativity and be ready to contradict prejudiced ideas in the workplace and the wider community.

These ideas are explored further by Mercer et al (1999) who describe the different faces of oppression that disable adults in our society. It is not hard to see how these attitudes channel the minds of young disabled children.

A key to change is the presence of young disabled people within the workplace. Without them, it is highly unlikely that the thought and wisdom needed to effectively include can be developed. No training and research in the world is enough to achieve this. Only within meaningful workplace relationships will people learn how best to facilitate the inclusion of each individual.

[ref: Mercer, G. Shakespeare, T. & Barnes, C. (1999) 'Exploring Disability: a sociological introduction']

The language of respect

We have already considered the negative and unhelpful language that is often used in the media to describe the lives and image of disabled people. In fact, there is so much confusion around the terminology of impairment and disability that sometimes we are too scared to talk about the issues at all. In order to tackle equality issues, we need to move forward from this state.

Unfortunately, too many non-disabled doctors, educationalists and social workers still insist on using politically correct - rather than appropriate - terminology. Political correctness simply confuses issues, advocating terms such as physically challenged, visually challenged etc. Such expressions detract from the real issue: who is being challenged here? Disabled people have no problem with their difference, but *do* feel challenged by other people's lack of tolerance and by the barriers that make it harder for them to participate.

'People **with** disabilities' is inappropriate too: although disabled people **have** impairments, they **are** disabled by outside forces.

Many disabled people have felt empowered by the ideas and language of the Disability Rights movement. This language, endorsed by disabled people, focuses on respect and self representation. For many the term 'disabled' has become positive and empowering, as it denotes the recognition of oppression and affiliation to a movement. Used as a verb - I am disabled by attitudes; he is disabled by systems, he faces disabling structures - it recognises disability as a social oppression - something external to the person. Significantly, it also acknowledges something that can be changed.

The nub of the issue does not concern 'good' or 'bad' words. Respectful language should be neither negative nor positive: it should be neutral.

Guidelines on respectful language:

These guidelines are aimed at promoting an awareness of disability issues through recommendations about use of language. This should avoid the perpetuation of assumptions about disabled people and ensure the writing does not cause offence. The adoption of these guidelines should help to challenge disablism, promote a social rather than individual model of disability, and support non-discriminatory practice.

- Avoid using medical labels as this may promote a view of disabled people as patients. It also implies the medical label is the over-riding characteristic; this is inappropriate.
- If it is necessary to refer to a condition, it is better to say, for example, 'a person with epilepsy' not an epileptic, or 's/he has cerebral palsy' not a spastic.
- The word disabled should not be used as a collective noun (for example as in 'the disabled').

More specifically, the following are recommended:

Avoid the disabled, the blind, the deaf;

To call any group of people 'the' anything is to dehumanise them. Use blind people, deaf people or disabled people. Under social model thinking, the person has an impairment and is disabled by oppressive barriers of attitude, structures and environments in society. Disabled people are anyone with a long-term impairment who is oppressed and discriminated against because of these barriers.

Avoid able-bodied person as the opposite of disabled;

Use *Non-disabled person* 'Disability' is not a description of a personal characteristic. A disabled person is not a 'person with a disability' as the person does not *own* the disability in the way that you might be 'a person with brown hair'. Consequently, the opposite of 'disabled' is not 'able-bodied' or 'abled', but 'non-disabled' or 'enabled'.

Avoid 'people with disabilities'

The term is used in the US and literature from overseas: but it assumes that the *person* has the disability; 'Disabled people' is more acceptable as it recognises the social oppression.

Avoid handicapped:

Use disabled people, handicap means having an imposed disadvantage. The word may have several origins:

- a) from horse races round the streets of Italian City States, such as Sienna, where really good riders had to ride one-handed, holding their hat in their other hand to make the race more equal.
- b) by association with penitent sinners (often disabled people) in many parts of Europe who were forced into begging to survive and had to go up to people 'cap in hand'.
- c) from a 17th century game called 'cap i' hand' in which players showed they accepted or rejected a disputed object's valuation by bringing their hands either full or empty out of a cap in which forfeit money had been placed. This practice was also used in the 18th century to show whether people agreed to a horse carrying extra weight in a race (i.e. deliberately giving it a disadvantage).

Avoid victim of;

Use *person who has* / *person with*, these are neutral terms, unlike victim. Disabled people are not victims of their impairment because this implies they are consciously singled out for punishment. Similarly, the word sufferer can imply someone upon whom something has been imposed as a punishment.

Avoid crippled:

Use *person who has* / *person with* - The word comes from Old English crypel or creopel, both related to the verb 'to creep'. These, in turn, come from old (Middle) German 'kripple' meaning to be without power. The word is extremely offensive.

Avoid suffering from:

Use *person who has / person with* in this way we can denote difference between illness, difference, and social oppression. As speakers, or writers, we cannot assume that an impairment comes with pain. Unfortunately we can assume that difference leads to the oppression of marginalised groups caused by enduring negative stereotypes.

Avoid wheelchair bound:

Use *wheelchair user*, Wheelchair users see their wheelchair as a means of mobility and freedom, not something that restricts them, apart from problems with lack of access.

Avoid the mentally handicapped

Use *person with a learning difficulty*; In the UK over 500,000 people with learning difficulty were locked away in Mental Handicap Hospitals because tests showed they had low Intelligence Quotients (IQ). These tests have since been shown to be culturally biased and only to measure one small part of how the brain works. People with learning difficulties have chosen the name “people with learning difficulties” for themselves because they think that, through education, which they have largely been denied, they can improve their situation.