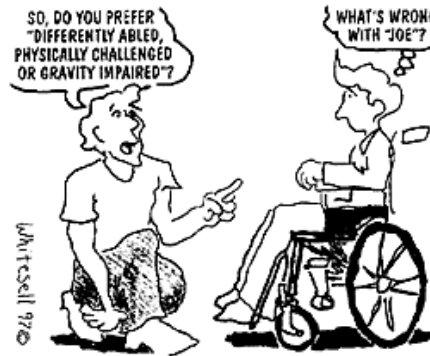




Disability Sheffield
The Centre for Independent Living

Disability Sheffield Information Service

Disability Language and Behaviour



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You may be looking at this information sheet hoping to find an answer to what is 'correct' and what is 'incorrect' use of language and behaviour when you speak to or meet disabled people. Perhaps you engage with disabled people in a professional capacity or you have an interview or presentation that involves disability issues.

Anxieties about 'political correctness' may leave you worried about saying the wrong thing or causing offence and this can prove in itself to be a barrier to engaging with disabled people.

Also you may be aware that the terminology used by disabled people has changed over the years, making it difficult to know which terms are 'acceptable'.

Even disabled people themselves, for example amongst our staff and volunteers have different opinions about the correct use of wording and the phrase "political correctness gone mad" sometimes springs to mind. After all is it really so wrong to call an accessible toilet a disabled toilet – as long as the toilet is fit for purpose?

The following letter **in the magazine Disability Now (May 2008 Edition)** also expresses a similar view for the ongoing debate around the use of 'acceptable terminology' when referring to disabled people.

"Have we become over sensitive and so politically correct that people no longer know how to address those of us who are disabled in one way or another? I admit that I am happier to associate my son with the term 'Down's syndrome than mongoloid but should I feel upset because I am referred to as a diabetic rather than a person with diabetes – of course not! We should be concentrating on the things that really change lives, like understanding, acceptance, tolerance and social inclusion. Unless people are being intentionally unkind in their choice of words we should be relaxed about it."

In an attempt to demystify the subject we have decided to use the traffic light system to show what disabled people consider to be unacceptable (red) through to the acceptable or preferred terminology (green).



Disability Sheffield champions the Social Model of Disability and we believe that the language used to talk about disability and impairment affects the way society views disabled people. Some words and phrases give offence because they reinforce prejudice and cause discriminatory attitudes and practices among the general public. The most difficult barrier faced by disabled people can be other people's attitudes. Terminology is important, because words reflect our attitudes and beliefs and some of the terms we tend to use may not reflect how some disabled people see themselves

The use of particular words or phrases can also conjure up a negative image of disabled people.

Here are some examples of negative terminology which we suggest you avoid because they are is likely to cause offence and are definitely in the **STOP** (Red) section of our traffic light.

Afflicted with – conveys a tragic or negative view about disability



Suffering from – confuses disability with illness and implies that a disability is a burden

Victim of – infers that disability is somehow a tragedy (all three imply that disabled people are essentially to be pitied)

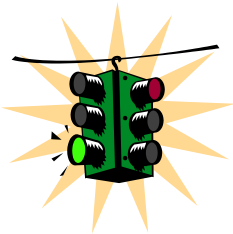
Cripple or crippled, spastic, handicapped, dumb, mad, subnormal - older terminology is sometimes still used particularly by older people, but it is generally thought to be offensive.

Abbreviated words such as **Spas** are sometimes used as a form of verbal abuse.

Wheelchair bound – disabled people are not bound to their wheelchairs

Invalid – this term literally means not valid

Able-bodied – the preferred term is ‘non-disabled’. ‘Able-bodied suggests that all disabilities are physical and ignores unseen disabilities and that disabled people are not able/capable



Although there is no universal agreement on acceptable and appropriate language, the following list of preferred terminology used to describe people with a disability should be helpful and belong in the **GREEN** section of our traffic light. They are by no means definitive though some could even appear against an **ORANGE** traffic light.

If in doubt one useful tip is to look at national disability websites to see the terminology used on the website about the disabled people that the website represents.

Preferred	Instead of
Disabled Has an impairment e.g. mobility impairment / hearing impaired, visually impaired	The disabled, handicapped, retarded, spastic, invalid, cripple, suffering from
Non Disabled	Able Bodied
Disabled person/ people/ child/woman/man or person/people/child/woman/man with an impairment	People with a disability/disabilities, person/child/woman/man with a disability/disabilities
Non-disabled person/people	Able bodied person/people
Deaf, hearing impaired, hard of hearing people	The deaf
Blind, visually impaired, partially sighted people	The blind

People with learning difficulties, people with a learning disability, people with learning disabilities	Mentally handicapped
Dual sensory impairment, deafblind	Deaf and dumb
Living with mental health needs or requirements or diagnosis if appropriate but being referred to by name is preferred	Mental illness/mental health problems
Physical disability	Physically handicapped
Living with (state medical condition) or Has epilepsy, is deaf etc	Severely disabled, suffers from...
Person with epilepsy, dyslexia or schizophrenia	epileptic, dyslexic, schizophrenic
disabled person, person with Down's syndrome	mongol
Family members, relatives and friends	Carers (only to be used when the individual disabled person cannot make decisions for her/himself)
Personal assistants, sighted guide, support worker (as appropriate)	Carers (meaning paid home carers)
Specific needs/requirements individual needs, learning support needs, access requirements	Special needs
Wheelchair user For wheelchair users	Wheelchair bound For wheelchairs
Accessible toilet	Disabled toilet
Blue badge holder Parking for disabled people	Disabled Parking
person with mental health difficulties/issues	mentally ill

person who has experienced emotional or mental distress	
personal assistant, sighted guide, support worker (as appropriate) use the professional title	helper
Person of restricted growth	Dwarf, midget
learning disability (not to be confused with mental health difficulty)	mental handicap
person with dyslexia, person with specific learning difficulties	word blind
Brain injury , cognitive impairment	Slow, retarded
Requirements	Needs

The following general suggestions – sometimes called disability etiquette – will help you to behave in an appropriate way and many are just common sense.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't assume you know whether, when and what help a disabled person needs. Ask the disabled person to let you know what his/her requirements are
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't make assumptions about someone's level of impairment or requirements based on a previous experience of a person with the same type of impairment or your assumed knowledge of an impairment. For example someone with cerebral palsy can have mild to moderate or severe impairments and some people have 'hidden' impairments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most disabled people don't need help. Offer help if you think it appropriate, but wait for the disabled person to respond. Only help if the disabled person confirms that they want it. If it's not clear ask the disabled person to explain what you should do.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak directly to a disabled person, not through a personal assistant or relative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid making casual remarks that are personal or intrusive, and do not ask inappropriate questions. 'What happened to you – why can't you walk properly?'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a disabled person asks you to read something to them or to repeat what you have just said, do not assume that they are stupid or shout
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common expressions such as saying " See you later" to a blind person will generally not cause offence

To summarise:-

- behave naturally and respectfully, as you would to any other person
- focus on the person, not the disability
- talk to the disabled person, not their personal assistant or carer
- if in doubt whether you are behaving inappropriately or using the right language ask the disabled person
- avoid making assumptions about a person's impairment or their needs
- take care not to make intrusive or inappropriate personal remarks.

In this way you will be treating a disabled person as you would wish to be treated yourself.

What do you think of this factsheet?

If you would like to comment on this factsheet or provide additional information from your own experience please let us know and we would be happy to consider adding to or amending the factsheet. We welcome any comments to help us improve our service. Our contact details are:-

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Disclaimer

No recommendation is given or implied by providing these details. Whilst every effort is made to ensure accuracy we cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions. Please note that the inclusion of groups or individuals on the factsheet does not mean that they have been vetted or are recommended by Disability Sheffield Information Service. Details may change so it is important you check the information provided to make sure they are accurate and suitable for your own requirements

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