



Disability Language Guide

Inclusive language seeks to treat all people with respect, dignity, and impartiality. It is constructed to bring everyone into the group and exclude no one. It's important to acknowledge that using inclusive language is an essential part of creating an inclusive culture. This guide focuses on disability terminology and language.

Disabled people/people with disabilities

We, at Enhance the UK, subscribe to the social model of disability. The model explains that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their medical impairment or difference. Therefore, people who endorse this model do not see themselves as a person with a disability. They see themselves as a person with an impairment, disabled by their environment. The social model helps us recognise that removing these barriers creates equality and offers disabled people more independence, choice and control.

We appreciate that some people prefer the term 'person with a disability' and when engaging in conversations it's important to listen to how someone refers to themselves and mirror their language.

Many people think of the word disabled as negative and should be avoided because it means not abled. And why it's easy to see why this assumption could be made, if we think about the social model above, this isn't true as it's not referring to the person with an impairment but the barriers that they may face. People often use euphemistic terms such as 'special' and 'differently-abled' as a way of trying to be inclusive - these terms are not appropriate and are actually offensive.

Positive not negative

Avoid using language which suggests that being disabled is a negative thing and encourages pity such as 'suffers from' and 'is a victim of'. This perpetuates harmful stereotypes and you do not know how a person feels about their disability. Some people see their disability as a positive thing which has enhanced their life and therefore are offended by such language. Remember empathy is important, but sympathy shouldn't be used.

Avoid Labels

No one likes to be defined by their impairment. Where possible, avoid medical labels. Often you will not need to refer to someone's impairment, but if you do, avoid referring to someone as 'a diabetic' for example, as this dehumanises them (and calling them 'a person with diabetes' instead is much better as it grants them their personality back). If you are ever in doubt, ask them.

Focus on access needs and not impairments

Asking someone to 'disclose' or 'declare' their impairment can be unhelpful as there may be several reasons why they do not wish to share this information. A better approach is to ask about any access requirements that someone may have as it is less intrusive whilst still giving you the information you need.

Asking appropriate questions

If someone discloses that they have a disability/impairment, there is no expectation for you to be experts and understand what their access needs are, as everyone is different. It is perfectly acceptable to ask someone sensitively how their impairment may impact on them attending an event/meeting or accessing any services. Just make it clear that you are asking so you can ensure that they have appropriate assistance and support.

Collective nouns

Collective nouns such as 'the disabled' should be avoided. The word disabled is a description and not a group of people. It is better to use disabled people instead. One exception to note is that many deaf people who use British Sign Language as their first language consider themselves as part of the 'deaf community' and will often refer to themselves as 'Deaf' with a capital D to emphasise their deaf identity.

Everyday phrases

Do not worry about saying everyday phrases such as 'let's go for a walk' to a wheelchair user or 'see you later' to a visually impaired person. Most people do not mind at all and the worst thing you can do is overthink and become so aware of everything you say that communication stops being natural.

Words to use and avoid

<i>Use</i>	<i>Avoid</i>
A disabled person	Cripple, invalid, handicapped
A person with a mental health condition	Mental patient, insane, mad, lunatic etc.
with a learning disability (singular) with learning disabilities (plural)	mentally handicapped, retard

Wheelchair user	Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, a wheelchair (when referring to a wheelchair user)
A Deaf British Sign Language user, a deaf person	Deaf mute, deaf and dumb
A person with Cerebral Palsy	Spastic
A person with restricted growth, A person of short stature	Midget, Dwarf (although some people are happy to use the term dwarf)
Seizures	Fits, spells, attacks
Non-disabled	Able bodied

When thinking about language, it's really important to be open to education. Remember that people have their own preferences. If you do say something someone dislikes, resist temptation to get defensive, and instead listen to the correction for use in the future.