



Language and Etiquette

Our words affect our thoughts,

Our thoughts affect our beliefs,

Our beliefs affect our feelings,

Our feelings affect our behavior,

Our behavior affects the world.

People First Language

- Speak of the person first, then the disability.
- Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
- Don't label a group of people by their disability. (i.e. Don't say "the disabled." Instead say, "people with disabilities.")
- Don't give excessive praise/ attention or talk in a different tone of voice to a person with a disability.
- Let the person do or speak for him/herself.

A Few Words about People First Language by Kathie Snow

People with disabilities constitute our nation's largest minority group. It's also the most inclusive and most diverse: both genders, any sexual orientations, and all ages, religions, socioeconomic levels, and ethnicities are represented. Yet the only thing people with disabilities have in common is being on the receiving end of societal misunderstanding, prejudice, and discrimination. And this largest minority group is the only one which anyone can join at any time: at birth, in the split second of an accident, through illness, or during the aging process. If and when it happens to you, how will you want to be described?

Words matter! Old and inaccurate descriptors perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce an incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier, which is the greatest obstacle facing individuals with disabilities. A disability is, first and foremost, a medical diagnosis, and when we define people by their diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals. Do you want to be known primarily by your psoriasis, gynecological history,

or the warts on your behind? Using medical diagnoses incorrectly – as a measure of a person’s abilities or potential --- can ruin people’s lives.

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” Mark Twain

Embrace a new paradigm: “Disability is a natural part of the human experience...” (U.S. Developmental Disabilities/ Bill of Rights Act). Yes, disability is natural, and it can be redefined as a “body part that works differently.” A person with spina bifida has legs that work differently, a person with Down syndrome learns differently, and so forth. People can no more be defined by their medical diagnoses than others can be defined by gender, ethnicity, religion, or other traits!

A diagnosis may also become a sociopolitical passport for services, entitlements, or legal protections. Thus, medical, educational, legal, or similar settings are the only places where the use of a diagnosis is relevant.

People First Language puts the person before the disability, and describes what a person has, not who a person is. Are you “cancerous” or do you have cancer? Is a person “handicapped/disabled” or does she “have a disability”? Using a diagnosis as a defining characteristic reflects prejudice, and also robs the person of the opportunity to define himself.

Let’s reframe “problems” and into “needs.” Instead of, “He has behavior problems,” we can say, “He needs behavior supports.” Instead of, “She has reading problems,” we can say, “She needs large print.” And let’s eliminate the “special needs” descriptor---it generates pity and low expectations!

A person’s self image is tied to the words used about him. People First Language reflects good manners, not “political correctness,” and it was started by individuals who said, “We are not our disabilities!” We can create a new paradigm of disability and change the world in the process. Using People First Language is right---just do it, now!

A Few Examples of People First Language:

Say:

Instead of:

Children/adults with disabilities

Handicapped, disabled, special needs

Say:

Instead of:

He has a cognitive disability

He’s mentally retarded

She has autism	She's autistic
He has Down Syndrome	He's Down's/mongoloid
She has a learning disability	She's learning disabled
He has a physical disability	He's a quadriplegic/crippled
She uses a wheelchair	She's confined to/wheelchair bound
He receives special ed services	He's in special ed; a special ed kid
People without disabilities	Normal or healthy people
Communicates with her eyes/devices/etc.	Is non-verbal
Congenital disability/Brain injury	Birth defect/Brain damaged
Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.	Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.

Language Tips

Afflicted/Affliction – do not use this term because it connotes pain and suffering. Most individuals with disabilities are not in pain, nor do they suffer because of their disability.

Confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair bound – People with disabilities are not more “confined to a wheelchair” than people with poor vision are “confined to their eyeglasses.” Both wheelchairs and eyeglasses are tools used by the individual to increase their independence. Try “uses a wheelchair for mobility,” or “has a wheelchair,” or “gets around by wheelchair.”

Crippled – avoid this word unless talking about an object.

Deaf and dumb or deaf mute – People who are deaf have healthy vocal cords. If they do not speak, that is because they do not hear the correct way to pronounce words. Try “person who is deaf” or “person with a hearing impairment.”

Disabled person – Use the term “person with a disability” thus putting the person before the disability.

Disease – Most people with disabilities are as healthy as anyone. Use the word “condition.”

Drain or burden – Try “added responsibility.”

Gimp – Slang used by people with disabilities to mock society’s attitudes towards them. However, can have negative connotations if used by a person who is able-bodied.

Handicap – Do not use to describe a person’s physical condition. Persons with disabilities are not necessarily handicapped. The term handicap refers to environmental barriers preventing or making it difficult for full participation or integration.

Invalid – This word means literally “not valid”. Everybody is valid.

Patient – Use this term only when referring to someone who is in a hospital or under a doctor’s immediate care.

Poor – Avoid this word unless you are talking about a person of low financial status. A person’s financial status need not be related to his/her disability.

Unfortunate – Adjective that describes someone with bad luck, not a person with a disability.

Victim – A person with a disability was not sabotaged, nor was the individual necessarily in a car, plane or train accident. Having a disability need not make a person a victim.

Etiquette Tips

Persons with Speech Difficulties

1. Give whole, unhurried attention to the person who has difficulty speaking.
2. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
3. Rather than speak for the person, allow extra time for the conversation and be patient. Do not finish a person’s sentence.
4. If you have difficulty understanding, don’t pretend that you do. Repeat as much as you do understand. The person’s reaction will guide you and clue you in.

Persons with Hearing Loss

1. Get the person’s attention with a wave of the hand, or a tap on the shoulder.
2. Speak clearly and slowly, but do not shout. Be flexible in your language. If the person experiences difficulty understanding what you are saying, switch the words around and rephrase your statement rather than keep repeating. If difficulty persists, write down what you are saying.

3. Many persons with hearing loss read lips. Place yourself facing the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when talking in order to provide a clear view of your face.
4. When an interpreter accompanies a person, direct your remarks to the person rather than to the interpreter.

Persons with Vision Loss

1. When you enter a room, indicate who you are. Let the person know when you are leaving the room.
2. When addressing a person who is blind, it is helpful to call them by name or touch them gently on the arm.
3. When offering your assistance, do not grab a person's cane or arm, this can be very disorienting for the person. If you are walking with a person who is blind, offer your arm for them to hold. The person may feel most comfortable walking a half step behind. Walk at your normal pace.
4. Don't worry about using words such as "see" or "look" in your conversation. These words are a part of everyday conversation and are not offensive.
5. A guide dog is a vital tool for individuals with vision loss. Refrain from speaking to or petting a guide dog. This could distract the animal from their work and lead to a dangerous situation for the individual they are guiding.

Persons With Cognitive Impairments

1. Use a calm voice and be reassuring.
2. Use short sentences and simple, concrete words.
3. Focus on the individual's talents and abilities. Be respectful and ensure that the individual is treated with dignity.
4. Give extra time for the individual to process and respond. Look for signs of stress or confusion.

Persons with Mental Health Disabilities

1. Listen and pay attention. Pay attention both to verbal communication (words) and nonverbal communication (voice quality and body language).
2. Acknowledge the person's feelings and express care and concern "you seem nervous," "you seem sad."

3. Validate the person's feelings. Acknowledge that the person's feelings are understandable, i.e. "I can see how you might feel that way." This is not the same as agreeing with the person's reactions.
4. Ask the person what may have caused the feelings.
5. Do not use psychological terminology/jargon.
6. Ask about social supports – family, friends, community, faith, etc. Find out what helped them in the past.
7. Remind them that they deserve to feel better.
8. Empower the individual. Encourage them to think about their personal strengths, their individual gifts/talents, their value as a human being.

Persons With Multiple Chemical Sensitivities

1. Avoid placing people in rooms with recent pesticide sprays, strong scented products like disinfectants, cleaners, scented candles and room fresheners, new paint or carpet, or other recent remodeling.
2. Allow the person to wear a mask or respirator, use an air filter, or open a window as needed.
3. For many, the fragrances we wear have deep personal, religious, or cultural significance. Understand that for others fragrances can cause serious health issues. However, if someone moves away from you or asks you to move, don't be offended, they are trying to stay safe and comfortable.
4. Give extra time for the individual to process and respond. Look for signs of stress or confusion.

Persons Using Wheelchairs

1. A person's wheelchair is part of his or her body space and should be treated with respect. Don't hang or lean on it unless you have the person's permission.
2. Speak directly to the person and if the conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit down or kneel to get yourself on the same level as the person in the wheelchair.
3. Don't worry about using expressions such as "running along" or "walked away" when speaking to a person in a wheelchair. These sayings are used in every day conversation and are not offensive.

4. Wheelchair Use Provides Freedom. Don't assume that using a wheelchair is in itself a tragedy. It is a means of freedom, which allows the person to move about independently. Structural barriers in public places create some inconveniences; however, more and more public areas are becoming wheelchair accessible.

Additional Suggestions

1. Don't discourage children from asking questions about wheelchairs and disabilities. Children have a natural curiosity that needs to be satisfied so they do not develop fearful or misleading attitudes. Most people are not offended by questions children ask them about their disabilities or wheelchairs.
2. Remember that the person with a disability is a person like anyone else.
3. Appreciate and emphasize what the person can do.
4. It is appropriate to offer your help if you think it is needed but don't be surprised or offended if the person would rather do it himself. If you are uncertain how to assist, ask the one who you believe needs assistance.

These materials have been adapted from the ABIL Peer Mentor Training Manual @April 2009, updated September, 2014. Arizona Bridge to Independent Living, Phoenix, AZ 85034