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Language and Disability

Language is continually evolving, and that includes language related to people with disabilities. Staying current is important, not to show that you are "politically correct," but to communicate effectively and with respect. What you say and write may enhance the dignity of people with disabilities or inadvertently reflect stereotypes and negative attitudes.

Some words and phrases don't recognize the broad range of capabilities of people with disabilities. People with disabilities don't need or want to be pitied, nor should they be deemed "courageous" or "special" as they accomplish daily activities or work.

Remember, refer to the person first, not the disability. For example, "person who uses a wheelchair" or "person who has arthritis" is preferred over "the wheelchair user" or "the arthritic." This last term especially defines the disability as the person rather than as one aspect of his/her life. This general rule may be different within some communities, such as those who are blind or deaf. Individuals in these groups often self-identify as "blind person" or "deaf person." Also, mention the disability only when it is relevant to the discussion.¹

Inappropriate language	Appropriate language
the disabled, the blind, the deaf	people with disabilities, the disability community ("disabled" is an adjective, so it must be accompanied by a noun), the blind community, the deaf community
crippled, suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, invalid	has a disability, is a person with a disability, person with a physical disability, uses a cane, uses leg braces
normal person, healthy, whole	non-disabled, person without disabilities, able-bodied
impaired, impairment	disabled, has a disability
hearing impaired, hearing impairment, "the deaf"	deaf, hard of hearing, person who is deaf, person with hearing loss

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¹ King County, Office of Civil Rights, Disability Language and Etiquette, <http://www.metrokc.gov/dias/ocre/etiquette.htm>

Inappropriate language	Appropriate language
visually impaired, visual impairment, "the blind"	low vision, blind, person who is blind
wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair person	wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair
handicap parking, disabled parking	accessible parking, disability parking
dumb, mute	person who cannot speak, has difficulty speaking, uses synthetic speech, is non-vocal, non-verbal
stutterer, tongue-tied	person who has a speech or communication disability
CP victim, spastic	person with cerebral palsy
epileptic	person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
fit, attack	seizure, epileptic episode or event
crazy, lunatic, insane, mentally ill, mental disorder	person with a psychosocial disability, person with an emotional disability
retard, mentally defective, moron, idiot, imbecile	person with an intellectual disability
Down's person, mongoloid	person with Down syndrome
slow learner, retarded	person with specific learning disability
dwarf, midget	person of small stature, person of short stature, little person
"the paraplegic," "the quadriplegic"	person with paraplegia, person with spinal cord injury
birth defect	person with a congenital disability, disabled from birth
post-polio, suffered from polio	person with post polio syndrome, person with a disability as a result of polio
homebound	stay-at-home, hard for the person to get out