



## Plain Talking

This information is reproduced from a leaflet produced by Capability Scotland. Capability Scotland is the Scotland's leading disability organisation working with disabled adults and children and their families and carers to support them in their everyday lives.

The language we use about disability can often have a profound impact on a disabled person. The words we use can marginalise and victimise people and can sometimes be hurtful. In many cases people do not mean to offend, often they are just unsure or confused about which terms they should use.

This information sheet aims to offer guidance about the words and phrases that disabled people themselves have said they prefer. The guidance is intended to be helpful but there are few hard and fast rules. The best thing to do is to ask the disabled person for their advice.

The views expressed in this publication are those of disabled people who use Capability Scotland's services.

### **Disabled People or People with Disabilities?**

*"I feel I'm just like you – I just cant use my arms and legs."*

There is some debate over which is 'best': people with disabilities or disabled people. Some people prefer the term 'disabled people' because it implies they are disabled by their environment not their impairment. Other people feel that 'people with disabilities' or 'people with physical/sensory impairments' is better than 'disabled people' because it puts the person first.

Generally it comes down to individual preference. The Equality Unit at Capability Scotland uses the term 'disabled people' because we believe that people with impairments are largely disabled by the barriers in society, not by their impairment or condition.

Unacceptable terms include 'the disabled', 'the blind' and 'the deaf' which suggest that all disabled people are the same and are separate from the rest of society. 'Handicap' is also very negative because it comes from the expression 'cap in hand', which has associations with begging.

## **Call Me by My Name**

*"I would like to see less use of labels."*

Words like 'spastic', 'cripple', 'retard' and 'mongol' are insulting and hurtful and should be avoided. Many people also don't like to be defined by their condition – they wouldn't want to be described as, for example, 'an epileptic'. However, some people have no problem with people saying that they have a medical condition such as 'person with multiple sclerosis', because this does not define the person by their condition.

*"People call me a victim, it doesn't make me feel good about myself."*

Top of our list of hated phrases are the terms 'suffering' and 'victim of' which sensationalise disability and imply that disabled people are in a bad state. The word 'invalid' should also be avoided as it reinforces the popular misconception that if you are disabled you are ill and that you are not as 'valid' as non-disabled people.

## **Wheelchairs**

*"I don't want to be defined by my means of transport."*

For many people a wheelchair represents freedom, making it possible to get out and about. Phrases like 'wheelchair victim', 'wheelchair bound' and 'confined to a wheelchair' are negative because they imply that the individual is held back by their wheelchair. They also focus on the wheelchair rather than on the person who uses it.

## **Learning Disability**

Terms like 'mentally handicapped' and 'retarded' should be avoided when talking about people with learning disabilities as they are outdated and people find them offensive.

## **Mental Health**

There is a lot of negative terminology associated with mental ill health. Words like 'psycho', 'schizo', 'nutter', 'mental case', 'mad man/women' should not be used as they are inaccurate and stigmatise people with mental ill health.

## **Non Disabled People**

When you need to make it clear that you are referring to non disabled people don't use the term 'able-bodied' as this implies that disabled people are less able. Many disabled people are very physically fit and 'able-bodied'.

## **Talking to Disabled People**

The way that we communicate with disabled people is just as important as the words that we use. Our research highlighted some common communication issues that disabled people face everyday.

*"The lady helping with the shopping spoke directly to me and asked how I was doing... This make me feel really good."*

Speak directly to the person. Its very frustrating for disabled people when people speak to the person that they are with instead of speaking directly to them – the "Does she take sugar?" syndrome.

*"Eye contact and sitting down opposite the chair is so important"*

Ask wheelchair user where they would prefer you to be when they are talking. Often the best option is to pull up a chair because that way you are not crouching down, which some people find patronising, but are at the same height.

*"People act like I cant think for myself just because I have difficulty speaking."*

You should never assume someone has a particular impairment or condition just because of the way they communicate or appear. Also some impairments are not always apparent – they may be invisible.

*"I hate it when people pretend that they have understood what I have said when they obviously haven't."*

Most people with a speech impairment would prefer to be asked to repeat themselves than for people to pretend they have understood. Some disabled people also use communication aids. These are slower than the spoken word so it is important to be patient and give them time.

## Summary

The only hard and fast rule about talking to disabled people is to be respectful. If you are in doubt always ask the disabled person what they would prefer.

<b>We don't like</b>	<b>We Prefer</b>
The disabled	Disabled people / people with disabilities, people with physical / sensory / visual / hearing impairments
Handicapped	Disabled
Cerebral Palsy sufferer	Person who has Cerebral Palsy
Victim of Spina Bifida	Person who has Spina Bifida
Wheelchair victim / wheelchair bound / confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair / wheelchair user
Spastic	Person who has Cerebral Palsy
Mongol	Person who has Downs Syndrome
Cripple	Disabled Person / Person with a disability
Mentally handicapped / retarded	Person who has a learning difficulty / disability
Psycho / Nutter / Madman / Madwoman / Mental	Person with mental ill health / mental health problems
The Blind	Blind person / person with a visual impairment
The Deaf	Deaf person / person with a hearing impairment
Dumb	Person with a speech impairment
Able-bodied person	Non-disabled person

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
Be yourself	Be overly enthusiastic or attentive in your behaviour
Maintain eye contact and speak directly to the disabled person	Speak to the disabled person through the person they are with
Ask the disabled person to repeat themselves if you don't understand what they are saying	Pretend you understand what someone is saying if you don't
Give the person more time to speak if they have a communication impairment or a learning disability	Finish peoples sentences for them or presume you know what they are going to say
Respect a persons personal space and remember a wheelchair is part of their personal space	Lean on a persons wheelchair or move it without asking, pat assistance dogs, make patronising gestures like patting a persons head