

Tips for Communicating with People with Disabilities

One important consideration for communicating with people with disabilities (PWD) is updating language to avoid terms and labels that could be offensive. A good rule of thumb is to use “person-first” language, which places the person before their disability and avoids using a person’s disability as a way to refer to them.

Disability	Out-Dated Language	Respectful Language
Blind or Visually Impairment	Dumb, Invalid	Blind/Visually Impaired, Person who is blind/visually impaired
Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing	Invalid, Deaf-and-Dumb, Deaf-Mute	Deaf or Hard-of-hearing, Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Speech/Communication Disability	Dumb, “One who talks bad”	Person with a speech / communication disability
Learning Disability	Retarded, Slow, Brain-Damaged, “Special ed”	Learning disability, Cognitive disability, Person with a learning or cognitive disability
Mental Health Disability	Hyper-sensitive, Psycho, Crazy, Insane, Wacko, Nuts	Person with a psychiatric disability, Person with a mental health disability
Mobility/Physical Disability	Handicapped, Physically Challenged, “Special,” Deformed, Cripple, Gimp, Spastic, Spaz, Wheelchair-bound, Lame	Wheelchair user, Physically disabled, Person with a mobility or physical disability
Emotional Disability	Emotionally disturbed	Emotionally disabled, Person with an emotional disability
Cognitive Disability	Retard, Mentally retarded, “Special ed”	Cognitively/Developmentally disabled, Person with a cognitive/developmental disability
Short Stature, Little Person	Dwarf, Midget	Someone of short stature, Little Person
Health Conditions	Victim, Someone “stricken with” a disability (i.e. “someone stricken with cancer” or “an AIDS victim”)	Survivor, Someone “living with” a specific disability (i.e. “someone living with cancer or AIDS”)

General Tips

- ❖ Use a normal volume and tone when speaking to persons with disabilities.
- ❖ Never patronize people by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- ❖ If you offer assistance and the person declines, do not insist. If it is accepted, ask how you can best help, and follow directions. Do not take over.
- ❖ Do not make assumptions about what a person can and cannot do. A person with a disability is the best judge of his or her own capabilities.
- ❖ Do NOT pet or distract service dogs.

Disability-Specific Tips

Disability	Tips
Physical	Get on eye level; personal space includes a person's wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aid (never move someone's crutches, walker, cane, or other mobility aid without permission).
Visual	Identify yourself when approaching; identify when you are leaving; tap on shoulder to get attention.
Hearing	Speak towards the person, not the interpreter; do NOT cover your mouth, use certified interpreters; be aware of phone relay services, if you know any sign language, try using it.
Cognitive/Intellectual	Address the person directly; be concrete and specific; treat an adult like an adult; repeat information using different wording or a different communication approach; allow time for the information to be fully understood.

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1. Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up! National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) and the Kids As Self-Advocates (KASA); http://www.fvkasa.org/nyln_kasa/Language%20Doc.pdf
2. Achieving Physical and Communication Accessibility. National Center for Access Unlimited. Washington, D.C. 1991.