



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

You may be disabled yourself. 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 publication 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.

It is estimated that there are around 1 million disabled people and people with a long term illness or health problem living in Scotland today. This means it is increasingly likely that your neighbour, colleague, classmate or in fact anyone you come into contact with on a daily basis may be disabled. Families and carers to support them in their everyday lives. Capability Scotland is the country's leading disability organisation working for a just and fair Scotland. We work with disabled adults and children and their families and carers to support them in their everyday lives.

Plain Talking

Equality Unit



Plain talking



Disability equality starts here

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.

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

Call Me By My Name

Generally it comes down to individual preference. At the Equality Unit we use 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.

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.

"I feel I'm just like you - I just can't use my arms and legs."

Disabled People Or People With Disabilities?

"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.

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.

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This leaflet is available in a variety of formats including tape, large print and several minority languages. Please contact the Equality Unit to discuss what you need.

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

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.

Learning Disability
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.

Wheelchairs
Top of our list of hated phrases are the terms 'suffering' and 'victim' 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. "I don't want to be defined by my means of transport."

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 made me feel really good."

Speak directly to the person. It is 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 users 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 can't 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.



We don't like

We Prefer

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 Down's syndrome
Cripple	Disabled person / person with a disability / person with a physical impairment
Mentally handicapped / retarded	Person with a learning difficulty / disability
Psycho / nutter / madman or madwoman / mental	Person with mental ill health / mental health problems
The blind	Blind person / person with visual impairment
The deaf	Deaf person / person with hearing impairment
Dumb	Person with a speech impairment
Able-bodied person	Non disabled person

Do

Don't

Be yourself	Be overly enthusiastic or attentive in your behaviour
Maintain eye contact & speak directly to the disabled person	Speak to disabled people through the person they are with
Ask the disabled person to repeat themselves if you don't understand them	Pretend you understand what someone is saying if you don't
Give the person extra time to speak if they are using a communication aid or have a learning disability	Finish people's sentences for them or presume you know what they are going to say
Respect the person's personal space and remember that a wheelchair is part of a person's personal space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lean on a person's wheelchair or move it without being asked • Pat assistance dogs • Make patronising gestures such as patting a person's head