

Person First Language
Watch your language when talking to or
about people with disabilities

The following information details terminology that should be avoided when talking to or about people with disabilities. This information was taken from literature published by the Ohio Governor's Council on People with Disabilities and the President's Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

People with disabilities are just that, **PEOPLE!** They are not their disabilities and our language should recognize this fact. Therefore, we always place "people or person with" before the name of a person's disability. For example, a person with Multiple Sclerosis, or People with Spinal Cord injury.

Afflicted - is a negative word and suggests hopelessness, use "has" or "experiences" instead

Patient -this term is used by the medical community and reflects a "medical model" philosophy that there is something wrong with the person that needs to be fixed. Simply because someone has a disability does not mean that they are "sick" or are cared for regularly by a hospital or a doctor. Home care nurses, for instance, are not being taught to refer to the people they work with as their "consumers" or "clients"

Wheelchair-bound and confined to a wheelchair - These terms suggest that a person who utilizes a wheelchair is attached or imprisoned by the chair permanently. This is never the case, the wheelchair aids mobility, but people who use them transfer out of their chairs for many different tasks (e.g sleeping, toileting, driving, relaxing at home, using a chair and table under which their chair does not fit, etc.)

Impaired - This is a negative term meaning "spoiled" or "damaged." The correct term, when describing function, is has an impairment or limitations.

Crippled - This term is "Biblical" and portrays a person who cannot do anything, is the object of pity, and is to be ignored.

Deaf and Dumb or Deaf-mute - These are old terms to describe a person who could not hear or speak (orally). Many Deaf people can use oral speech but may prefer to use their primary language, American Sign Language. Deafness does not make a person "dumb" or "ignorant" as these terms suggest. Use instead Deaf or has a Hearing Impairment.

Gimp - Another antiquated term, once used to describe people who walked with an atypical gait. It is a negative term.

Suffer, suffering, or suffered - This term means that a person is in constant misery or pain as a result of a disability. This is very rarely the case, and many people with disabilities will tell you that their disability has actually had a positive impact on their lives.

Victim - This term suggests that a person has been "sacrificed" or is a "casualty" of and uncontrollable force. Disability is, in fact, a part of life. Barring sudden death, we will all experience disability at some point in our lives. If people with disabilities are "victims" therefore, than we all are. This term also suggested helplessness, and negates a person's strengths and worthwhile attributes and contributions to society.

Unfortunate - This term implies that the person is "unlucky", "unsuccessful", "cursed", and/or a "social outcast." People with disabilities want to be regarded as real, ordinary people with the same concerns as everyone else.

Retard, Retarded, or Retardate - Also now known as "The "R" word" suggesting that the word is so hurtful to people with developmental disabilities that it should never be spoken under any circumstances. It should not be used, even in passing, or even in regard to a person without a disability, to mean "stupid", "dumb", or "incapable." This word is so hurtful that there are organized campaigns designed to educate people about the history and impact of the word, and to eliminate it from the common vernacular (The "R word" campaign).

Disease - Describes a contagious condition; most people with disabilities are as healthy as the average person.

Any term ending in "ed." E.g. Mobility impaired, hearing impaired, disabled, vision impaired, physically impaired, mentally impaired, challenged, impaired etc.

Challenged - Implies that a person's circumstances are something to be overcome. People with disabilities did not have a choice whether to have disability or not, it just is. They did choose to get on with their lives in the best way they could and did not have to "overcome" anything to do it; it's just part of life!

Spastic, or Spazz - Some people with disabilities have conditions that cause their muscles to contract or contort involuntarily. This is a product of their disability and should not be ridiculed. Nor should the term be used to describe a person without a disability who is awkward or uncoordinated; this projects a negative connotation on the person with a disability whom experiences difficulties with muscle spasticity.

Amputee - They are not their amputation, person with amputation, or the person who has experienced an amputation.

Paraplegic or Quadraplegic/Tetraplegic - They are not there level of paralysis. A person with paraplegia or people with tetraplegia (the preferred term for paralysis from approx. the neck down).

Normal - Should never be used when referring to people. When used to describe a person without a disability or to contrast the experiences of a people with disabilities, it suggests that person with a disability is "abnormal" or "subnormal." In fact disability is a very "normal" part of the human experience. We will all have a disability at some point in our lives, that's life!

Cerebral Palsied, epileptic, Schizophrenic, Diabetic, Bi-Polar, Depressive, and so on. Adjectives should not be used as nouns. These are people! So we place the "person first" when referring to them, a person with cerebral palsy, and person with Schizophrenia, a person with Depression, etc.

Courageous - People with disabilities are not "brave" and do not want to be the object of pity, or be regarded as "heroic." They are simply living their lives, just like everyone else.

Handicapped - Another negative antiquated term that is derived from the expression "cap in hand" meaning "to beg." In the past, people with disabilities were not given access to work or the means to make a living; they were forced to "beg" for basic survival. Today, people with disabilities, work, pay taxes, and are making significant contributions to society.

Handicapped or handicapping is now used to mean the barriers people that still exist for people with disabilities. For example, the lack of a ramp into a public building is a "handicap" for a person who is using a wheelchair. Language that minimizes people with disabilities (this list), is referred to as "handicapping language."

Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant | Chief Executive Officer & Founding Director
Multicultural BRIDGE | www.multiculturalbridge.org

17 Main St. Suite 2 | Lee, MA 01238

T: 413-394-4029 | Muddy Brook Elementary: 413-644-2372 | **For**

Appointment: adminsupport@multiculturalbridge.org

Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women, Chair | gwendolyn@bccsw.org

Empowerment | Collaboration | **Celebration** | Learning | **Integration**
[Berkshire Eagle on Civil Rights Conference](#) | [NPR \(WAMC\) on Civil Rights Conference](#)

To order your copy of the Berkshire Mosaic contact us
at BerkshireMosaic@multiculturalbridge.org