

Introduction

People with disabilities are asking Canadians to use respectful terms when writing and speaking about them or about issues that affect their lives. They are also asking that images chosen to portray them be respectful and not reinforce outdated stereotypes.

Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier people with disabilities face in achieving full integration, acceptance, and participation in society. Since words are a mirror of society's attitudes and perceptions, we should all put great thought into how we present information about people with disabilities, to help overcome negative attitudes and shape positive ones.

Language use is changing as people with disabilities to achieve equality, independence, and full participation in all aspects of Canadian society. We can ensure they reach these goals by using proper words and images, and by changing the ways in which issues are reported.

Purpose

To promote a fair and accurate portrayal of people with disabilities, and to recommend current and appropriate terminology to help you reach this goal.

General Guidelines

It is important to remember that words have a precise meaning and are not interchangeable. The following guidelines suggest appropriate terminology to use when speaking or referring to people with disabilities.

- A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun. People are not conditions. It is therefore preferable not to use the term "the disabled," but rather "people with disabilities."
- Avoid categorizing people with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgmental, non-emotional, and are

accurate descriptions. Avoid using “brave,” “courageous,” “inspirational,” or other similar words to describe a person with a disability. Remember that the majority of people with disabilities have similar aspirations as the rest of the population, and that words and images should reflect their inclusion in society, except where social isolation is the focal point.

- Avoid references that cause discomfort, guilt, pity, or insult. Words like “suffers from,” “stricken with,” “afflicted by,” “patient,” “disease,” or “sick” suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.
- Avoid words such as “burden,” “incompetent,” or “defective,” which suggest that people with disabilities are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to people without disabilities.

People with disabilities are comfortable with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. People who use wheelchairs go for “walks,” people with visual impairments “see” what you mean, and so on. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner, but that doesn’t mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.

Remember that, although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy, hemophilia, and mental health and learning or developmental disabilities also encounter barriers and negative attitudes.

Follow these suggestions to improve communications with persons with disabilities.

- It is appropriate to shake hands when introduced to a person with a disability. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb do shake hands.
- When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to him or her, rather than through a companion, interpreter, or intervener who may be there.
- Relax. Be yourself. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later" or "Got to be running along" that seem to relate to the person's disability.
- Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel like it, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help. Listen to any instructions the person may want to give.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking and talking.

Conclusion

Words and images are a powerful tool in shaping society's attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities. However, despite the progress achieved in recent years, negative stereotypes still exist.

Society must do everything in its power to eliminate remaining prejudices and stereotypes. Choosing words and images that help shape positive attitudes will promote the person rather than the disability.

Appropriate words**Instead of...**

Birth defect, congenital defect, deformity

Blind (the), visually impaired (the)

Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound

Cripple, crippled, lame

Hard of hearing (the), hearing impaired

Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb

Epileptic (the)

Fit, attack, spell

Handicapped (the)

Handicapped parking, bathrooms

Inarticulate, incoherent

Please use...

Person born with a disability, person who has a congenital disability

Person who is blind, person with a visual impairment

Person who uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user

Person with a disability, person with a mobility impairment, person who has a spinal cord injury, arthritis, etc.

Person who is hard of hearing

Note: These individuals are not deaf and may compensate for a hearing loss with an amplification device or system.

Person who is deaf

Note: Culturally-linguistically deaf people (that is, sign language users) are properly identified as "the Deaf" (upper-case "D"). People who do not use sign language are properly referred to as "the deaf" (lower-case "d") or "persons who are deaf."

Person who has epilepsy

Seizure

Person with a disability

Disability parking, bathrooms

Person who has a speech disorder, person who has a speech disability

Instead of...

Insane (unsound mind),
lunatic, maniac, mental
patient, mentally diseased,
mentally ill, neurotic,
psychotic

Invalid

Learning disabled, learning
disordered, dyslexic (the)

Mentally retarded, defective,
feeble minded, idiot,
imbecile, moron, retarded,
simple, mongoloid

Normal

Person who has trouble...

Physically challenged,
physically handicapped,
physically impaired

Spastic

Suffers from, stricken with,
afflicted by

Victim of cerebral palsy,
multiple sclerosis, arthritis,
etc.

Please use...

Person with a mental health disability

Note: The term “insane” (unsound mind) should only
be used in a strictly legal sense.

The expression “person with a mental health
disability” is broad. If relevant to the story, you can
specify the type of disability, for example, “person
who has depression” or “person who has
schizophrenia.”

Person with a disability

Person with a learning disability

Person with an intellectual disability

Note: If relevant to the story, specify the type of
disability.

Person without a disability

Person who needs...

Person with a disability

Person who has spasms

Person with a disability

Note: People with disabilities do not necessarily
suffer.

Person who has cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis,
arthritis, etc.

Person with a mobility impairment, person with a
disability