Language Guide

What if I say the wrong thing? Learn and Move on!

Some words and phrases may intentionally or unintentionally express bias, and fear of saying the wrong thing can stop us from interacting. The chart below provides guidance on how to best use language when discussing disability. Language continuously evolves and we recognize that what is appropriate now, may change in time. With the suggestions below, we hope you feel more confident in understanding how and why language matters. Here are some overarching tips to get you started:

- Disability is diverse, ask the person what language they prefer
- Try not to highlight the disability unless it is essential
- The language used by people within a community may be different from the language that can be used by people who are outside of that community
- You may still be corrected, and that's okay!

Can you say that?	Recommended Language	Why it Matters
Addict, junkie, alcoholic, substance abuse	Person with substance use disorder, person with substance misuse disorder. Language Guide	These terms perpetuate stigma (i.e., dangerous, at fault, etc.) that can negatively impact persons with substance use or mis-use disorder. They also imply that a person's identity is solely defined by their substance use or mis-use, which is unfair and untrue. As well, addiction may not only refer to useable substance. The suggested language shows that the person 'has' a problem, rather than 'is' the problem.
Autistic, on the spectrum, person with autism, person who has autism	Autistic person vs. person with autism Language Guide on Autism	In the autism community, identity first language is preferred as autism is understood as an inherent part of an individual's identity, however, this preference varies depending on the individual. Always be sure to ask what language a person prefers. All terms are acceptable, however, anticipate that you may be corrected.
Birth defect	Person born with a disability	Using the word 'defect' to describe somebody or an aspect of them implies that the person is incomplete or flawed.
Crippled, crip, lame, invalid, handicapped	Person with a disability	While some disability activists have reclaimed the words 'crippled' and 'crip,' many other persons with disabilities consider them to be offensive and derogatory terms. Terms like lame, invalid and handicapped, have negative

		connotations and imply that a person is limited or disadvantaged.
deaf	Deaf (capital D) [Information about Deaf Culture](#)	The word 'deaf' describes the physical condition of a person with little or no functional hearing. Deaf (with a capital D) refers to individuals who identify with and participate in the culture, society, and language of the [Deaf](#). Using the proper terminology shows respect for the differences between Deaf, deafened (i.e., people who become deaf later in life), and hard of hearing populations/people
Deaf-mute	A Deaf person	Deaf-mute was previously used as a term for people who do not speak or hear. However, such individuals are fully capable of communicating through writing, sign language, lip reading, and many other ways. The term deaf-mute has also been wrongly used to describe people who are Deaf. A Deaf person can choose to use or not to use their voice – if they do not, they are not a mute person.
Deaf-Plus	Deafblind or Deaf (with another disability)	Although Deaf-plus has been used in the past to describe an individual who is Deaf and has another disability, the preferred terminology is to identify the disability. For example, individuals may identify as Deafblind.
Differently abled, challenged, special	Person with a disability	These terms can euphemize and stigmatize a person's disability. They are most often used in a way that infantizes disability and can come across as condescending.
Disabled person	Person with a disability vs. a disabled person	In Canada, most individuals prefer 'person first' language, where 'person with' comes before a disability. This is in line with the language suggested in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Across the world, many people prefer and feel empowered by 'identity first' language, such as disabled person. Always be sure to ask what language a person prefers.
Fits, or an epileptic	Seizures, person with epilepsy	Labelling a person with a disability based on their condition is demeaning and implies that their disability is primary trait that should define who they are.
Hearing impaired	Hard of hearing, person with hearing loss	For some people, the use of the word 'impaired' can make it feel like they are lacking. Persons who are hard of hearing have hearing loss that ranges from mild to profound.
High needs or high functioning	Faces increased barriers	Labels related to function can be harmful. Such labels can be inaccurate, create divide amongst the autism and other

		communities, and lead to false assumptions about what a person's needs are.
Mental, Crazy, nuts, insane.	Person who has a mental health condition. [Mental health language guide]	For some, these terms perpetuate mental health stigma and draw upon negative stereotypes that are misrepresentative of individuals with mental illness. However, it should be noted that some movements have worked to reclaim these terms: [Mad Pride.] What is deemed acceptable language may vary across individuals and their experiences. Be open to feedback and adapting the language you use moving forward. [Let's Talk]
Mentally challenged, the "R" word [Spread the word campaign]	Person with an intellectual disability, person with a developmental disability	These words are dehumanizing and have hurtful effects. Many people consider such terms to be offensive and derogatory.
Midget	A person of short stature, person with dwarfism, 'Little People' [Little People of Ontario]	The use of the word midget has a history of oppression and is an offensive and derogatory term.
Normal	Person without a disability	To refer to someone without a disability as 'normal' suggests that persons with disabilities are inherently different, strange, or odd.
Slow learner	Person with a learning disability	A person with a learning disability has difficulty learning certain skills and may experience challenges with other cognitive processes. This is because their brain processes information differently, not because they are 'slow learners'. The conditions in under which they are expected to learn a new skill may not be optimally set up to support their learning style
Stutterer	A person who stutters	Stuttering is a speech disorder and is often involuntary. In general, the word stuttering is preferred over stammering, and it is preferable to use person first language.
Suffers from, victim of, afflicted by, etc.	Person who has (a health condition)	Terminology like suffers from or is afflicted with imply that disability causes a reduced quality of life and elicits pity for the person.
The Deaf, the blind, the disabled	People or persons with disabilities	Grouping many diverse individuals into a collective noun suggests that all people who live with a particular disability are the same.
Visually impaired	Blind, low vision, sight or vision loss [Sight loss information from CNIB]	For some people, the use of the word 'impaired' can make it feel like they are lacking. Individuals who have vision loss have a reduction in their vision, including but not limited to blurred vision, cloudy vision, double vision, blind spots,

		poor night vision, loss of peripheral vision. Someone who is legally blind has a visual acuity of 20/200 or less in both eyes after correction and or a visual field of 20 degrees or narrower.
Wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair	If someone is confined or bound, it implies that they are helpless and require rescuing or intervening. These terms also elicit pity. Person first language ensures the focus is on the person, not on the wheelchair.

Additional Terms

Disability Confidence – The concept of disability confidence encourages employers to be fully confident - going beyond compliance and legal requirements - in all areas pertaining to disability to enhance accessibility and inclusivity. Disability confidence is a thoughtful approach that encourages businesses to make progress on their disability inclusive journey.

Intersectionality – The interconnected nature of social categories including, but not limited to: disability, race, gender, sex, class, sexual orientation which overlap and create interconnected experiences of disadvantage.

I would say the best English term to describe us is not "special needs" or "differently abled" − it is disabled. We should say that loudly and proudly, because there is no shame in it. My needs are nothing special. Everyone has different needs. The idea is that the more we proudly use the word disabled, the less shame and fear there is attached to it. - Maysoon Zayid

Please note that in Canada, "person with a disability" may be more widely accepted than "disabled" at the time of writing this guide.