

This brochure is produced as a service of the Tennessee Disability Coalition, a statewide alliance of advocacy, planning, service provider and professional organizations committed to influencing society to *value, include, and support* people with disabilities.



TENNESSEE DISABILITY COALITION

480 Craighead St., Suite 200  
Nashville, TN 37204  
615-383-9442 (voice)  
615-292-7790 (tty/tdd)  
615-383-1176 (fax)  
coalition@tndisability.org

**The Coalition is a member of Community Shares, a funding federation supporting social justice and social change organizations in Tennessee.**

A MEMBER OF



# TALKING About Disability



## A Guide to Using Appropriate Language

## Times have changed for people with disabilities... ...but language lags behind

Life for most people with mental or physical disabilities is vastly improved over what it was twenty or thirty years ago.

The Americans with Disabilities Act and other federal and state laws assure that people with disabilities have the same basic rights as people without disabilities.

Some things have been slower to change; namely, attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities. Ignorance and discrimination can be serious impediments to achieving integration, productivity, and independence for people with disabilities.



The use of outdated language and words to describe people with disabilities contributes greatly to perpetuating old stereotypes. No longer should we view people with disabilities as helpless or tragic victims.

Awareness is the first step toward correcting this injustice. If public opinion about people with disabilities is to be brought up to date, the public needs to hear and learn to use appropriate language.

It is especially important for the media, elected officials, public speakers, and others in leadership positions to portray people with disabilities sensitively and realistically.

This brochure is intended as a guide to using descriptive language when talking to or about people with disabilities.

# Guidelines for Talking about Disability

**1. Do not refer to a person’s disability unless it is relevant.**

**2. Use “disability” rather than “handicap” to refer to a person’s disability.**

It is okay to use “handicap” to describe accessibility accommodations, such as handicap parking; but it is better to use “accessible” in those instances. It is also okay to say that a person is handicapped by obstacles, such as architectural barriers or the attitudes of ignorant or insensitive people. Never use “cripple/crippled” in any reference to disability.

**3. When referring to a person’s disability, try to use “people first” language.**

In other words, it is better to say “person with a disability” or “man who has autism” rather than “a disabled person” or “an autistic man,” particularly in a first reference.

**4. Avoid referring to people with disabilities as “the disabled, the blind, the epileptics, the retarded, a quadriplegic,” etc.**

Descriptive terms should be used as adjectives, not as nouns.

**5. Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person’s disability.**

Don’t say “suffers from,” “a victim of,” or “afflicted with.” Don’t refer to people with disabilities as “patients” unless they are receiving treatment in a medical facility. Never say “invalid.” These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities. Respect and acceptance is what people with disabilities would rather have.

**6. Don’t portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman.**

This implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.

**7. Don’t use “normal” to describe people who don’t have disabilities.**

It is better to say “people without disabilities” or “typical,” if necessary to make comparisons.

**8. Never say “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.”**

People who use mobility or adaptive equipment are, if anything, afforded freedom and access that otherwise would be denied them.

**9. Never assume that a person with a communication disorder (speech impediment, hearing loss, motor impairment) also has a cognitive disability, such as mental retardation.**

On the other hand, people with mental retardation oftentimes speak well.



## Rules for Appropriate Language

### USE

### Avoid

person with a disability / has a disability people with disabilities / have disabilities disabled person / people (less preferred)	<i>the</i> disabled / <i>the</i> handicapped invalids, patients crippled, deformed, defective (NEVER)
people without disabilities typical person non-disabled person (less preferred)	normal, healthy, able-bodied
wheelchair user / uses a wheelchair	wheelchair-bound / confined to a wheelchair
congenital disability / birth anomaly	birth <i>defect</i> / <i>affliction</i>
<i>has</i> cerebral palsy (CP) or other condition	a victim of cerebral palsy
<i>has had</i> polio / experienced polio has a disability as a result of polio	<i>suffers from</i> polio / <i>afflicted with</i> polio post-polios (as a noun referring to people)
people who have mental retardation (MR) person with mental retardation mentally retarded person (less preferred)	<i>the</i> mentally retarded / mentally deficient a retardate / a retard (NEVER) a feeble-minded person
child with a developmental delay (DD) person with a developmental disability	
person with Down Syndrome	the Down's person / Mongoloid (NEVER)
person who has epilepsy people with seizure disorders seizure / epileptic episode or event	<i>the</i> epileptic (to describe a person) <i>the</i> epileptics (to describe people) fits / epileptic fits
people who have mental illness person with a mental or emotional disorder	<i>the</i> mentally ill crazy, psycho, mental case (NEVER)
people who are blind / visually impaired	<i>the</i> blind / blind as a bat (NEVER)
person who is hard of hearing	hearing impaired (translates as “broken hearing” in sign language)
person who is deaf / the Deaf (Deafness is a cultural phenomenon and should be capitalized in those instances.)	deaf-mute deaf and dumb (NEVER)
speech or communication disability	tongue-tied, mute