

THE POWER OF WORDS

The positive power of words lie in their ability to build bridges, enabling people of widely differing characteristics to share what they know and what they feel. Words are powerful tools that can bring people together, or, just as easily, keep them apart. And nowhere is this more obvious than when we use words associated with a person's disability.

Blatantly derogatory terms, such as *"retard," "spaz," "gimp"* obviously keep people apart, conveying an image of those with disabilities as not fully deserving of the level of respect we ordinarily give people.

But other words and phrases work on a much subtler level. Many have gained widespread usage without people giving much thought to whether they are truly accurate descriptions of a disability, let alone if they imply a generalized judgment about those of us live with that disability.

No one likes to be stereotyped based on just one aspect of their life. This is especially true for a person who happens to have a disability. Like anyone else, we want to be seen as a person with unique abilities, not automatically pigeonholed as a tragic or courageous object of pity.

But it's that *"tragic martyr"* stereotype we inadvertently foster every time we use phrases like *"victim of cerebral palsy," "bravely battling epilepsy,"* or *"confined to a wheelchair."* Even the word *"handicapped"* implies one is forever hindered by one's condition, incapable of ever overcoming the effects of one's disability.

Using the positive power of words, however, enables us to shift the emphasis away from a person's assumed limitations, and instead focus on simply describing differences in accurate, non-judgmental ways that convey respect for the individual.

This has led to the advent of **"People First"** language, which puts the person first, followed by (when relevant) a simple description of our disability. For instance, *"a person who is blind,"* or *"a man with Down syndrome,"* or *"a woman who uses a wheelchair"* doesn't assume we feel *"victimized"* by our disability. Nor does it make a judgment about whether we are *"brave"* or feel *"handicapped"* by our disability at all.

As far as accuracy is concerned, terms for disabilities have changed over the years as we have progressed medically, socially, and ethically. So many of the words once used commonly are now terribly outmoded.

But, as Tim Harrington says in *The Ten Commandments*, *"If people are worried about every word they say, they end up not communicating at all."* Even we with disabilities differ on some terms. We would never want to discourage anyone from speaking to us out of a fear of using the wrong term. That's why the best (and usually most appreciated) course of action is to simply ask what terms we prefer.

We with disabilities aren't asking you to use a special vocabulary just for us. In fact, just the opposite. Speak to us with the same words you'd use with anyone else. Because nothing can better express your respect for us as individuals than that.

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OUR MISSION: to assist people with disabilities to live, work and socialize within a fully accessible community.

OUR VISION: We believe in and support equitable and inclusive communities for people living with disabilities.