

---

# Proper Disability Terminology

---

Language is a powerful tool. It is important to use current and appropriate terms when working with the disability community. Things like age, culture, and personal experience will all affect the language that an individual will use or prefer. Default to person-first language when you don't know how to address someone with a disability, then ask how they want to be addressed just as you would ask their preferred name or pronouns. Be mindful that these terms evolve over time and will continue to change, it is always good practice to ask an individual and get the disability community's input. Here are some general rules to keep in mind:

## Person and Identity First Language

**Person first language** (person with a disability) means you refer to the person before you say their disability. Person-first language is used so a person doesn't feel like their disability is the most important part of their identity.

**Identity first language** (disabled person) means you refer to the disability as a label for the person. Identity first language is used when a person wants to show they are proud of their disability, or they want their disability to be the main part of their identity.

People may simply prefer one or the other. Be mindful that some disabilities do not have an option for identity first and can only be person-first, such as a person with ADHD.

- Person First: a person with a visual disability or a person who is blind.
- Identity First: Deaf, as they see themselves as a member of the Deaf community.

## Do Not Use Victimizing Language

Do not use language that makes a person sound passive, pitiable, or victimized. Language should instead emphasize abilities or be neutral.

Remember that being disabled does not mean that a person is a patient and not all disabilities are illnesses.

- Examples to avoid: confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound, home-bound, challenged, suffering from a specific disability, or a victim of a specific disability.

## Do Not Use Dated Language

Many older labels come from outdated medical terms but are now considered offensive slurs and should never be used. Retarded should never be used in any way, written or verbal, per [Rosa's Law](#).

- Examples to avoid: Gimp, Cripple, Handicap, Lunatic, Mongoloid, Retarded, and Idiot

However, some disability activists have started to use older derogatory words to reclaim them and show disability pride. This can be highly nuanced and personal. If you are not a member of the disability community, it is considered offensive if you use this terminology, even if someone may refer to themselves in this way.

- "cripple" as "Crip"
- "person affected by substance use" as "Addict"

## Do Not Use Euphemisms

Do not use patronizing language that tries to ignore or diminish a disability. These terms further the idea that a disability is inherently bad and should not be openly discussed, or that belonging to the disability community cannot be a source of pride. The word "disability" provides certain legal protections, so it is important to encourage individuals to use the word.

- Examples to avoid: Differently Abled, Special, Special Needs, or Diffability

## Describing People Without Disabilities

When describing people without disabilities, use neutral language and avoid descriptors that imply that not having a disability is positive. Instead, use non-disabled, a person without a disability, or a person without a visible disability. You may assume a person does not have a disability, but not all disabilities are visible or disclosed to you!

- Examples to avoid: normal, healthy, able-bodied, or whole

## Preferred Terminology and Language to Avoid

This list has common preferred terms and phrases, but there are many more. Use the information on the first page if you are ever unsure.

Preferred Terminology	Language to avoid
Individual with a visual disability, Individual who is blind	The blind, sight challenged
Individual with epilepsy, Individual with a seizure disorder	Epileptic; spastic; person who has "fits" or "attacks"
Individual of short stature, little person	Dwarf or midget
Individual with a speech disability	Speech impairment; speech impediment
Individual with dyslexia	Dyslexic
Individual with a psychiatric disability, Individual with a mental health diagnosis	Crazy; maniac; lunatic; demented; schizo; psycho; feeble-minded
Individual with a learning disability	Slow; slow learning; retarded;

Individual with an intellectual disability	stupid; differently-abled; special needs; diffability; mentally retarded; dim-witted; Mongoloid
Individual with a physical disability	Crippled; handicapped; deformed; defective; Crip
Individual with a spinal cord injury	Quadriplegic; paraplegic; incapacitated; wheelchair-bound; handicapped; gimp
Individual who is deaf or hard of hearing	The deaf; deaf and dumb; mute; hearing impaired
Individual with a congenital disability	Deformed/person with a birth defect
Individual with a cleft lip/cleft palate	Harelip
Individual with AIDS, HIV positive person	HIV or AIDS victim; AIDS Carrier; Sick; AIDS/HIV Patient; Positive; HIVer
Individual with burns	Burn victim; disfigured
Individual who had a stroke	Stroke victim/Suffered from a stroke
Individual with multiple sclerosis (MS)	Individual who suffers from MS
Individual affected by Substance Use, Person in Recovery	User; junkie; drug addict
Individual without a disability, Individual without a visible disability	Able-bodied; normal; whole

## Preferred Terminology and Language to Avoid

**Don't Say:** Epileptic; spastic; person who has "fits" or "attacks"

**Person First:** Individual with epilepsy, Individual with a seizure disorder

**Don't Say:** Dwarf or midget

**Person First:** Individual of short stature

**Identity First:** Little Person

**Don't Say:** Speech impairment; speech impediment

**Person First:** Individual with a speech disability

**Don't Say:** Dyslexic

**Person First:** Individual with dyslexia

**Identify First:** Dyslexic individual

**Don't Say:** Crazy; maniac; lunatic; demented; schizo; psycho; feeble-minded

**Person First:** Individual with a psychiatric disability, Individual with a mental health diagnosis

**Don't Say:** Slow, slow learning; retarded; stupid, mentally retarded; slow; dim-witted

**Person First:** Individual with a learning disability OR Individual with an intellectual disability

**Don't Say:** Crippled, handicapped; deformed; defective, Quadriplegic; paraplegic; incapacitated, Wheelchair-bound, Wheelchair user, handicapped

**Person First:** Individual with a physical disability OR Individual with a spinal cord injury

**Identity First:** Crip

**Don't Say:** The deaf; deaf and dumb; mute; hearing impaired

**Person First:** Individual who is deaf or hard of hearing

**Identity First:** Deaf

**Don't Say:** Hare lip

**Person First:** Individual with a cleft lip/cleft palate

**Don't Say:** HIV or AIDS victim, AIDS Carrier, Sick, AIDS/HIV Patient, Positive, HIVer

**Person First:** Individual with AIDS

**Identity First:** HIV-positive person

**Don't Say:** Burn victim; disfigured

**Person First:** Individual with burns

**Don't Say:** Stroke victim/Suffered from a stroke

**Person First:** Individual who had a stroke

**Don't Say:** Person who suffers from multiple sclerosis (MS)

**Person First:** Individual with MS

**Don't Say:** User, Junkie, Drug Addict

**Person First:** Person affected by Substance Use, Person in Recovery

**Identity First:** Addict, In Recovery