

The Power of Person First Language

“Language is culture,” or “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can really hurt me.” The words we use to refer to people can subtly, but powerfully influence the way we see them. This is especially true for the words used to refer to people who have disabilities.

Historically, disability has been described in terms that convey images of suffering, tragedy, illness and limitation. Referring to the “disabled,” or describing someone as “afflicted” or “suffering from” a disability, prevents us from seeing the whole individual for whom disability is only one characteristic. These terms label or categorize people, make them seem less than human, minimize expectations and create emotions ranging from pity to outright rejection. On the other hand, by paying attention to the language we use, we can more easily recognize our common humanity.

Changing our language is an important step towards overcoming habits of thought that unfairly limit opportunities for people with disabilities to achieve, contribute and participate as valued members of their communities.

Depersonalizing Language	Person First Language
Mary is disabled, handicapped or a brave sufferer.	Mary has a disability.
John is a victim of cerebral palsy, suffers from a disease.	John has cerebral palsy.
Katie is crazy, loony, nuts, insane or psycho.	Katie has a mental health diagnosis.
Bob is retarded, mentally defective, or not all there.	Bob has an intellectual disability.
Sara is crippled, lame or deformed.	Sara has a physical disability.
James is wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair.	James uses a wheelchair.
Candy is afflicted by Multiple Sclerosis.	Candy has Multiple Sclerosis.
Dee is mute or dumb.	Dee does not speak.
Matt is a downs or mongoloid.	Matt has Down Syndrome.
Joan is slow, stupid or lazy.	Joan has a learning disability.
Bill is brain damaged.	Bill has a brain injury.

The reality is, some people with disabilities are particular about language while others are not. Some people wear their disabilities as proud emblems while others conceive their disabilities as incidental to who they are. So consider the above as recommendations, but don't let them inhibit you. What's most important is a genuine effort to be more respectful in words and actions. Language is a help and can be a marker of sensitivity, but it's not everything.

If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. -George Orwell