



Guidelines: what words to use

How we refer to people is incredibly important. Language, and what's appropriate, is constantly evolving and so it's important to be aware of current terms. Notice the words that Deaf and disabled people use to describe themselves and their communities. You may not always get it right but your desire to be respectful and responsive will go a long way.

Avoid euphemisms and don't be afraid to ask questions about someone's preferences. Just remember that every person is an individual.

Two ways to refer to disability

There are two ways of referring to the experience of disability that are common in New Zealand and internationally.

1. Person-first language

The first is known as the "person-first" approach, where it's important to refer to the person before their disability (e.g. person with a disability, a person who is Deaf).

Okay: person with a disability

Not okay: crippled, handicapped, suffers from/afflicted with disability, wheelchair bound

2. The social model

The second, known as the "social model", asserts that society disables people through the physical and social barriers it presents — for example, a person using a wheelchair is disabled by a flight of steps preventing access to a building. The wheelchair itself is liberating and provides mobility. Using the term "disabled people", therefore, is stating that a person is disabled by society's barriers, not by their condition or impairment.

Okay: disabled people, disabled or disability community, disability sector, disability perspective

Some people prefer person-first terminology, while others see it as devaluing an important part of their identity. Many disabled people see their disability as an important and positive part of their identity. "Disabled person", therefore, can be a political statement.

Many people who are autistic prefer to be described as an "autistic person" rather than a "person with autism" because they feel that autism is a huge part of their identity. The term "autism spectrum disorder" is used in New Zealand to describe the wide variety of manifestations of autism but the UK and Australia are beginning to use the term "condition" rather than "disorder".

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For Deaf people, the term “Deaf” (with a capital D) refers to the Deaf culture and community to which people belong, rather than to their hearing status. Their preferred form of communication is New Zealand Sign Language.

In line with the Office for Disability Issues and the New Zealand Disability Strategy, Arts Access Aotearoa tends to use the term “disabled people” – people who have been disabled by society.

It also uses people with “learning disability”, a term preferred by the disabled people’s organisation People First New Zealand Ngā Tāngata Tuatahi.

What's okay/not okay

There's no consensus on terms. Just try and be flexible, respectful and transparent about the language you use and why you use it.

In fact, think about whether it's relevant or necessary to label the person as “disabled”. Calling someone a person, patron or visitor, without the label, is okay.

The following is a list of currently acceptable language, gathered from a range of resources and organisations.

Okay: disabled person/people/community, disability sector, disability organisation

Not okay: the disabled, handicapped, invalid, abnormal, special/special needs, cripple, deformed

Okay: people without impairments, non-disabled people

Not okay: normal, able-bodied, typical, healthy

Okay: mobility impaired person, physically impaired or physically disabled person

Not okay: cripple, handicapped

Okay: accessible toilet/parking space

Not okay: disabled toilet/parking spaces (the space or toilet can't be disabled)

Okay: the person has ... (the impairment)

Not okay: afflicted with, suffers from, victim of

Okay: blind person/people, vision impaired person, partially sighted person, person with low vision

Not okay: the blind

Okay: Deaf person/people, hearing impaired person, person who is hard of hearing

Not okay: the deaf, deaf and dumb, deaf mute

Okay: the person uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user

Not okay: wheelchair confined/bound, quadriplegic

Okay: mental health consumer, mental health service user, person with lived experience of mental illness

Not okay: schizo, crazy, patient, mentally ill, mental case, disturbed, psycho

Okay: impairment

Not okay: disease, birth defect, affliction

Okay: person with intellectual disabilities, person with learning disability

Not okay: mongol, spastic, retarded, feeble-minded

Okay: person has Down syndrome

Not okay: Mongol, Downs