

MINDFUL TERMINOLOGY

Pointers when speaking about disability and impairment

“The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises disability as an evolving concept which results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers. It recognizes persons with disabilities as those persons who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is in agreement: *“There are various definitions of disability. However, all the rights-based definitions share certain common elements even if they emphasise or word them differently. Common elements include: The presence of impairment; Internal and external limitations or barriers which hinder full and equal participation; a focus on the abilities of the person with a disability; loss or lack of access to opportunities due to environmental barriers and/or negative perceptions and attitudes of society.”*

We are in agreement and prefer the use of “person first” language – to respectfully address the individual, emphasizing the person and not the disability.

If you are unsure how to refer to someone, ask the person.



Respect,
Listen,
Ask.

SAY • Persons with disabilities

WHY?

The disability rights movement of SA accepts the suggested terms and it aligns with international practices.



AVOID

- Physically challenged
- Differently abled
- Persons living with a Disability
- PWD

SAY • Living with an impairment

WHY?

Impairment is a fact and is part of the human condition, while disability is imposed by society.



AVOID

- Living with a disability

SAY • Person who has cerebral palsy

WHY?

Words like “suffers from” indicate on-going pain and torment, which is not the case for most persons with disabilities. “Afflicted with” denotes a disease, which most disabilities are not. “Victim of” implies that a crime is being committed on the person who has a disability.



AVOID

- ... suffers from...
- ... is afflicted with...
- ... is a victim of...

SAY • Uses a wheelchair • Wheelchair user

WHY?

For someone using a wheelchair, wheelchairs are a convenient mode of mobility. When referring to someone as “wheelchair bound” or “confined to a wheelchair”, you disregard that many persons with disabilities engage in activities without their wheelchairs, for example, driving, sleeping, and making use of the bathroom. The use of a wheelchair is liberating for those who rely on it for mobility purposes.



AVOID

- Wheelchair bound
- Confined to a wheelchair

SAY • Disability • Disabilities

WHY?

The word “handicap” derives from the phrase “cap in hand”, referring to a beggar, and is inappropriate to use when referring persons with disabilities. It is also a golf term.



AVOID

- Handicap
- Cripple/Crippled
- Differently abled
- Physically or mentally challenged

SAY • Persons without disabilities

WHY?

Referring to someone as “normal” or “whole”, implies that persons with disabilities are not normal or whole. Who determines what “normal” is?



AVOID

- Normal
- Whole

SAY • Client • Customer

WHY?

The word “patient” refers to someone who is ill. Do not call persons with a disability a “patient” unless they are sick. An “invalid” refers to someone who is helpless which is not true for all persons with disabilities.



AVOID

- Patient
- Invalid

SAY

- Born without arms
- Congenital disability

WHY?

A person may be “born without arms” or “has a congenital disability,” but is not defective.

AVOID

- Deformed
- Deformity
- Birth defect

SAY

- Person who has Down’s Syndrome
- Person who has cerebral palsy
- Person who has epilepsy
- Person who has depression
- Person who has diabetes
- Person with an intellectual disability
- Person with a psychosocial disability
- Person with a sensory disability
- Person with a neurological disability
- Person with a physical disability

WHY?

It is disrespectful to define someone by his/her disability. Persons with disabilities must not be regarded as “damaged goods”

AVOID

- Mongol or mongoloid
- Cerebral palsied or spastic
- Epileptic
- Mentally retarded
- Insane
- Brain damaged
- Slow

SAY

- Person of short stature
- Little person/ Little people

WHY?

It is derogatory to assume that persons with dwarfism belong to a circus

AVOID

- Short circus person
- Midget
- Dwarf

Hearing loss is defined as follows by the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, para. 6.1.1.4

Persons who are hearing Impaired or deaf:

Persons who are hearing impaired and/or acquire deafness later in life, might however never utilise SASL as their language of choice. They require access to lip readers, note-takers, loop systems, captioning and sub-texting for access to information and communication.

Deaf persons:

Deaf persons use South African Sign Language as their first language, and therefore require that they have access to SASL training, in particular for Deaf children and their parents. They require access to SASL interpreters, as well as note-takers, captioning and sub-texting to facilitate access to information and communication.

Deafblind:

Deafblindness is a combination of hearing and vision loss in any variation of the combination in one human body. This results in difficulty for the person to get information and communication as well as mobility challenges.

Brought to you by
the National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IMPAIRMENT AND DISABILITY

Impairment is a perceived or actual feature in the person's body or functioning that may result in limitation or loss of activity or restricted participation of the person in society with a consequential difference of physiological and/or psychological experience of life.

Disability is imposed by society when a person with a physical, psychosocial, intellectual, neurological and/or sensory impairment is denied access to full participation in all aspects of life, and when society fails to uphold the rights and specific needs of individuals with impairments.

Persons with disabilities include those who have perceived, and/or actual physical, psychosocial, intellectual, neurological and/or sensory impairments which, as a result of various attitudinal, communication, physical and information barriers, are hindered in participating fully and effectively in society on an equal basis with others.



*Being mindful means paying attention
in a particular way; on purpose, in the
present moment, and non-judgementally*

- John Kabat-Zinn

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