# Disability language – words matter

The words and images that are used and the way information is presented can play a major role in shaping perceptions and attitudes. The portrayal of disabled people can promote equality, inclusion and full citizenship or it can contribute to society’s negative stereotypes.

The language we use influences how we think about people and situations. The medical model views disability as a “problem” that is the responsibility of the disabled person. The social model uses language that locates the “problem” within social attitudes, systems and practices that act as barriers to full participation.

When meeting disabled people, especially for the first time, be yourself and don’t worry about saying the wrong think or acting correctly. This is much more likely to be a positive start to the relationship than if you appear awkward or patronising.

Most disabled people are comfortable with the words to describe daily living. People who use wheelchairs “go for walks” and people with vision impairments may be pleased, or not, “to see you.”

Common phases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example “deaf to our pleas” or “blind drunk.”

## Disabled people vs people with disabilities

In New Zealand we use the term disabled people. During the development of the New Zealand Disability Strategy there was much discussion and consultation on the language to be used and in the end 'disabled people' was chosen- rather than 'person with disability', 'people with disabilities', 'people with experience of disability' etc. The reasoning was that:

* + people are people first
  + they have particular impairments or conditions, that is, they are people with impairments e.g. a person with a vision impairment, or a hearing loss, or limited mobility.
  + attitudinal and physical barriers in the world we all live in disable them
  + therefore, they are disabled people (or, more accurately, people disabled by the way we build and organise our world). 'Disabled' refers to things outside the person that impact on them and put barriers in the way of their participation.

This use is explained in the New Zealand Disability Strategy and is strongly supported by DPA. However, individuals and groups have continued to use the language they feel most comfortable with e.g. ‘people with an intellectual disability’ or, even more preferred, ‘people with learning disabilities’. And it was 'people with disabilities' that the disabled people's organisations present at the United Nations were comfortable with. However, as people come to understand the reason above they tend to feel more comfortable with 'disabled people'.

## Words to use and avoid

Use language that respects disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives.

Don’t use language that portrays disabled people as victims, such as “suffers from,” “challenged.

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| **Avoid** | **Preferred** |
| Afflicted by, suffers from, victim of | Has (name of condition or impairment) e.g. person with cerebral palsy |
| Attack, spell, fit | Seizure |
| Birth defects, deformity | Person born with disability  Person with a disability from birth |
| Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair | Someone who uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user |
| Hearing impaired, hard of hearing, | Person who is hard of hearing |
| Lame | Person with a mobility impairment |
| The blind | Blind people |
| Disorder | Condition+ |
| People who are visually impaired/ have serious sight problems/loss | People who have a visual impairment |
| The symptoms of a condition | The effects of a condition |
| People who have special needs | People who have particular requirements |
| Disclosing a disability | Telling people about a disability |
| Mentally retarded, retard, slow | Person with an intellectual (learning) disability |
| Spastic | Person who has muscle spasms |
| Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb | New Zealand Sign Language users identify as the Deaf  Person who is deaf or the deaf (non NZSL user) |
| Dwarf, midget | Person of short stature |
| Schizophrenic | Person who has schizophrenia |
| Cripple/Crippled | Person with a physical disability  Person with a mobility impairment  Person who walks with crutches  Person who uses a walker |
| Epileptic | Person who has epilepsy |
| Normal | Person without a disability |

**Note:** don’t use heroic language when disabled people complete everyday tasks and responsibilities. Disabled people don’t see themselves as inspiring simply because they’re going about their daily lives. We all have challenges – working around those challenges is not heroic, it’s just human.

**View:** Stella Young –<https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much> [Video: 9 min 13 sec]