

QUICK GUIDE

LANGUAGE AND DISABILITY

What's the issue with language and disability?

For many years people used the 'medical model of disability' which is a way of thinking about disabled people that sees them as 'wrong' or 'a problem' and seeks to 'cure' them. As a result people used language that disempowered disabled people and treated them as 'victims' and as if there was something 'wrong' with them.

So what's changed?

In recent years the 'social model' of disability has been found to be a better way of thinking about the challenges disabled people face. The social model sees the way society is organised as the problem, not the disabled person. As a result the focus is on ways to remove or reduce the barriers disabled people deal with on a daily basis.

How does this affect language?

Most of us use words and terms we were brought up with without even thinking. But the words we learned to use when talking about disability were often based on the medical model. By continuing to use these words and phrases we are continuing to dis-empower and victimise disabled people. Many of us don't even realise that this is what we are doing. We don't do it on purpose. But it is important to think about the words we use and to make sure we are not disempowering disabled people by repeating old fashioned language that is offensive in the way it assumes disabled people are not full and equal members of society.

So what would disabled people prefer?

The most important thing is to ask the disabled person themselves how they want to be described. But there are some terms that are generally accepted by disabled people's organisations and we outline some of them below. A key thing to remember is to try to use words that acknowledge people are disabled by society and to avoid negative words that medicalise, disempower or victimise disabled people.

Disabled people or people with disabilities?

This one is a bit complicated! In the UK the terminology "disabled people" is preferred by disabled people's organisations. This is because it makes it clearer that people are being actively 'disabled' by society. However in the USA the term 'people with disabilities' is preferred and this language is also used by the United Nations. This is because they want to make sure disabled people are seen as being people first and foremost. However in the UK this approach is seen as not really putting the onus on society to change and being closer to the medical model.

In UNISON we use the term 'disabled people' because our disabled members believe it fits better with the social model. However we know that some organisations and disabled people use 'people with disabilities'.

What about 'impairments'?

The social model argues that it is not a person's health condition, diagnosis or experience in itself that makes a person disabled, it is society. The actual health condition – such as cancer, depression or being blind - is called an 'impairment'. It is when this impairment comes up against an inflexible society that it results in the person being 'disabled'.

However some disabled people don't like the use of the word impairment as they think it is too negative. Others use the term 'difference' instead. In UNISON we use the terms impairment as it reflects the social model better but we understand not everyone has the same approach.

What about mental health?

UNISON's priority is that people with mental health problems can use the language that they feel best describes their experiences and empowers them most. However we use the term 'mental health problems' instead of, for example, mental health 'conditions' or 'issues'. We also try not to describe people as 'suffering' with mental health problems – we use the term 'experiencing mental health problems' instead so that we are more empowering and don't victimise people. Nonetheless, some people with mental health problems feel that the word 'suffering' better describes what they live through and we fully support their right to name their own experiences. 'Mental health survivor' is also preferred by some.

Medical model	Social model
Invalid/handicapped	Disabled person
Able-bodied person	Non-disabled person
Disabilities	Impairments
Wheelchair bound	Wheelchair user
The blind/the deaf/the disabled	Blind people/deaf people/disabled people
An epileptic/autistic	A person with epilepsy/autism
Stroke victim	A stroke survivor/'they had a stroke'
Disabled toilets	Accessible toilets

Finally, language is continually evolving. So always take on board the language a disabled person or disabled people themselves prefer is used.

Where can I find more information?

UNISON's Quick Guide to the Social Model of Disability explains this model in more detail.

