



ACTIVE LIVING ALLIANCE
For Canadians With A Disability

ALLIANCE DE VIE ACTIVE
pour les Canadiens ayant un handicap

The Language of Disability

Language changes our perceptions and how we interact with each other. The Golden Rule applies to all - a person with a disability is no different. Remember, when in doubt; treat someone the way you wish to be treated and put the person first.

What is a disability?

Today, society's understanding of disability is improving as we recognize "disability" as what occurs when a person's functional needs are not addressed in his or her physical and social environment.

By not considering disability a personal deficit or shortcoming, and instead thinking of it as a social responsibility in which all people can be supported to live independent and full lives, it becomes easier to recognize and address challenges that all people—including those with disabilities—experience.

Don't use the term handicapped in reference to people!

A handicap is something imposed externally on a person with a disability. Attitudes, physical barriers such as stairs, loose gravel pathways can create a handicapping condition for someone with a disability.

It's easy

Talk to the person, not the person they're with.

Look at the person, not the interpreter.

Make no assumptions about the person's ability or disability.

The best place to start is with the person!

If you need to refer to the person, in relation to their disability, use person-first language and these words with dignity.

- Person with a disability
- Person who uses a wheelchair/walker/scooter/mobility device
- Wheelchair user
- Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
- Person who uses sign language
- Person with a developmental disability
- Person with an intellectual disability
- Person who has a mental illness
- Person who has bipolar disorder/schizophrenia/anxiety/depression etc.
- Person who is visually impaired or blind
- Person who has dwarfism
- Person with a communication disability
- Person who stutters/has a stutter
- Person with autism spectrum disorder
- Person with an amputation
- Person who has a prosthetic limb
- Person who has cerebral palsy/spina bifida/Down syndrome etc.
- Person who has a learning disability

What about expressions?

This one is a bit tricky and it depends on context.

Expressions such as:

“Let’s go for a walk,” “It’s nice to see you,” “I haven’t heard from you in a while,” “Did you see that?” are fine and those with a disability will unlikely take offence.

Someone who uses a wheelchair may say that they are going for a walk or choose to say that they are going for a wheel, don’t feel uncomfortable if you are walking or inviting them for a walk.

“Are you blind?” “What, are you deaf?” “That’s so retarded” are examples of offensive language and should be avoided.

Use non-disabled not able-bodied

Other expressions to avoid:

- Anything that labels a person in an unflattering way. For example “She’s insane” or “He’s a schizo”
- Using the word “challenged” or “handicapped”
- Using mental health and mental illness related words that increase stigma such as “happy pills,” “psycho” or “lunatic”
- Words that restrict ability such as “wheelchair-bound,” “suffering from,” “affected with” or “victim”



What about equipment or adaptations?

Accessible
Parking Stalls



Accessible
Washroom



Power Chair



Manual
Wheelchair/
Day Chair



Scooter



Sport Wheelchair



White Cane



Guide Dog/Service
Dog



Para Ice Sledge



Prosthesis



Hearing Aid



Cochlear Implant

