

GMCDP Information Sheet

Terminology – Words ... Words ... Words ...?

Over the years there have been lots of words used to describe disabled people. Many have been negative and hurtful to disabled people, and do not need to be used.

The words 'handicapped', 'invalid', 'vulnerable', 'infirm' and 'cripple' have all been used, and sometimes are still used, to describe disabled people. All in a very negative way, suggesting that disabled people are "less than" others, weak, "null and void" or invalid as in not valid.

This is certainly NOT the case!

Words also put us into categories, as though we are all the same - "the disabled," "the blind," "the deaf," etc. Again, this is very negative, because we are not all the same – we have different backgrounds, experiences and lifestyles.

"Disabled people" is the term the Disabled People's Movement has chosen to use. The phrase simply means people with impairments who experience barriers in society. It is not a negative term as some people think it is.

The phrase "people with disabilities" is often used. Some say that it puts the person first. But if we use the social model of disability this does not make sense. "Disability" is the barriers and discrimination disabled people experience in society. So disabled people do not "have disabilities" - the "disability" is out in society, not "with" the disabled person.

This is only a very brief look at words as many have been used over the years, but it is up to disabled people to say what words we are comfortable with, and get together as a group to challenge the negative words used against us.

Changing It Round

Here are some alternatives to words and phrases used.

'handicapped' change to: disabled person

'suffers from' change to: person who has / with

'crippled by' change to: person who has / with

'the disabled' change to: disabled people

'wheelchair bound' change to: wheelchair user

'mentally handicapped' change to: person with learning difficulties

'the blind' change to: blind people / visually impaired people

'people with disabilities' change to: disabled people

'afflicted by' change to: person who has / with

'abnormal' change to: different

'mute, dumb' change to: person with speech impairment

'invalid' change to: disabled person

'victim of' change to: person who has / with

'mental, mad' change to: mental health system user/survivor /
experiencing mental distress

A lot of these negative / offensive words and phrases are used by the media - "victim of", "suffers from". These suggest that disabled people's lives are "tragic", and usually come from or are meant to create pity or fear.

It is these feelings which are often the greatest barrier to disabled people.

If these words, which make people feel pity, fear or shame, were taken out of the language, and have neutral words in their place which create no emotion but which state a fact, then negative attitudes towards disabled people may begin to change.

This information sheet has been produced by Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People. © GMCDP, July 2013.

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