

Attitudes Toward People With Disabilities Or How To Avoid Being Run Over By A Power Wheelchair

Many people have never even met a person with a disability, let alone interacted with such a person. Therefore, this article contains some basic information to help avoid "Foot-in-Mouth" disease by those who will have some direct contact with people with disabilities. While most of the following refers to people with disabilities, some is applicable to people who are elderly as well.

The typical movie or television portrayal is somewhat less than accurate. (But then, isn't it always?). Usually, we have a delightful cherub "tragically stricken" with polio who struggles against all odds and, through force of will alone, "overcomes her handicap" and goes on to climb Mt. Everest after, of course, having earned at least five Ph.D.s because she had "fewer distractions" than most "normal" children. Or else we have the bitter war veteran who is finally "snapped out of it" by the plucky nurse and learns to "accept his handicap." Reality, however, is much more mundane.

Very little is "tragic" about the vast majority of people with disabilities. Very few are interested in hearing (a) how sorry people feel for them or (b) how courageous they are. People with handicaps are just people who happen to have a disability, which may **or may not** prevent them from doing the things you do — which brings up a point about terminology.

Much of the literature has persisted in talking about "the handicapped and the elderly." But "handicapped" and "elderly" are **adjectives** and we refer to people with **nouns**. Therefore, one should always say "people with disabilities," "people labeled mentally retarded" or the like. There is also disagreement in the community about the use of handicapped vs. disabled. To be on the safe side, alternate between the two terms.

Among those who are handicapped, there are many who use wheelchairs as their primary or exclusive means of mobility. However, these people are neither "confined" (locked up?) nor "bound" (tied up?) to their wheelchairs. For want of a better term, the appropriate phrase is "wheelchair user" or "person who uses a wheelchair."

Another misused term is “paraplegic.” Many people, having watched **The Men** too often on the late show, wrongly think that paraplegic is a synonym for handicapped. In fact, paraplegia is a disability resulting from a spinal cord injury causing paralysis and loss of sensation below the waist. Quadriplegia results from a spinal cord injury causing paralysis below the neck. However, there are many other physical conditions that cause people to use wheelchairs. The term “paraplegic” should not be used unless you know the person has that disability.

Incidentally, many elderly people dislike the term “senior citizen” since it is another euphemism like “passed away” used to avoid talking about an unpleasant subject -- in this case, growing old.

There is a tendency to associate disability with disease even when the condition in question is congenital. Many, if not most, people with disabilities are as healthy as most non-disabled people even though they may walk with crutches or use a wheelchair. People with disabilities can be just as lax as other people about seeing a doctor for regular routine checkups. (“Two aspirin” is our universal panacea, and we spell relief R-O-L-A-I-D-S just like everyone else.) Even those whose disability is due to a disease such as polio are not sick. This misconception is understandable since the most common media portrayal of people who use wheelchairs is in a hospital or convalescent home (with a shawl over the knees).

The “poster child syndrome” is used to great effect by charities to separate you from your money. This is not to say that the money is not put to good use -- it is. But the campaign relies on making children with disabilities the object of pity and thus promotes unfortunate stereotypes.

Many people have seen a wheelchair basketball game or the Special Olympics, but how many are aware of tennis, racquetball, handball, rugby, scuba diving, or even football (“touch” not “tackle” -- but some of the blocking is almost as deadly!) for people with disabilities? How about a person who is blind or who walks with crutches skiing? People who use wheelchairs can ski using a sit-ski on the slopes. And there is a national association for pilots with disabilities.

Obviously, not all people with disabilities are athletic any more than all nondisabled people. There are mathematics professors who are dyslexic, lawyers who debate legal technicalities from wheelchairs, personnel directors who are blind, movie stunt performers who are deaf. The list is endless. People with handicaps are as diversified as the general public. Disability is an “equal opportunity” minority. It accepts anyone regardless of race, creed, sex, national origin, economics, or age.

There is also considerable misunderstanding about mental retardation. People labeled mentally retarded are not “stupid.” A person labeled mentally retarded has the same capabilities and skills as you do to grow and change, but does so at a slower rate. Another common misconception is that a person’s appearance tells you how “retarded” a person is. As with all people, people labeled mentally retarded who have the same “IQ” may have quite different abilities, skills and personalities.

Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of people with a hearing impairment can and do speak. They often do not speak simply because of embarrassment. Most people don’t realize how hearing their own voice helps them speak. Severe hearing impairment from birth can result in a voice that sounds “different.” Sometimes people who are deaf have voices that are higher in pitch and difficult to understand. Also, contrary to popular belief, lip-reading is usually not sufficient for adequate communication. Everybody, including you, reads lips to some extent. But, complications arise when the speaker turns away, has a moustache, a cigarette, etc. So, if you don’t know sign language (some of which is easy and fun to learn, so why don’t you?) speak at a moderate speed. But don’t overdo it. Unnatural enunciation is confusing (you’re not Professor Henry Higgins and she’s not Eliza Doolittle).

Moreover, some people with disabilities may be unable to speak clearly or may even drool. This is due to a lack of fine motor (muscle) control, not a lack of intelligence. The worst possible response is to pretend you understood. It may be embarrassing to ask the person to repeat, but so what?

Another often repeated *faux pas*, when a person with a handicap is accompanied by a nondisabled person, is to address all comments and questions to the nondisabled person. This is often the typical response people have toward children, always talking to parents or adult companions. However, people with disabilities often must contend with such insensitivity all their lives.

Having attempted to dispel some myths and change some attitudes, here is a final word about terminology. **Never** use the terms “crippled,” “deaf and dumb,” “victim,” “invalid,” “retard,” “crazy” or “tragic.” “Patient” is reserved for use by an attending physician. Furthermore, most people with disabilities are tired of hearing about “sympathy” and “compassion” and how much of an “inspiration” they are.

Watch your sources. When quoting other “authorities,” be aware that many rehabilitation or health service agency professionals know much less about disabilities than people with disabilities. Generally, avoid quoting anything from

an organization whose name says “for the handicapped” as opposed to “of the handicapped,” although there are some notable exceptions. The best plan: if in doubt, leave it out.

People with handicaps consider themselves a minority group, are interested in their civil rights, and are not likely to listen to people tell how they are going to “allow people with disabilities to participate in society.” Many advocacy groups run by people with disabilities exist to fight for the civil rights of people with disabilities, including groups like Independent Living Programs, People First, and Disability Legal Rights Organizations. These advocacy groups are responsible for the improved access and participation by people with disabilities in society through legislative and judicial means and grass roots organizing efforts. Thus, improved participation in society has not been the result of benevolent actions by nondisabled people, but rather has been the result of long and hard fighting by the very people who have traditionally been denied such participation.

Last, but not least, there are the attitudes of people with disabilities themselves. There is Tiny Tim, the handicapped equivalent of Uncle Tom. There is Super Crip, the athlete, usually male, hung-up “macho” who tries to pretend he is not handicapped. Then there is the person who uses a handicap to manipulate you by trying to make you feel sorry or guilty. Don’t buy it.

It is really quite simple to deal with people who have disabilities. If you want to know something, ask, then listen to the answer. Throw away all your stereotypes and assumptions, and treat people with courtesy, awareness, respect. Replace fear and “seriousness” with openness and humor. In short, treat a person with a disability exactly like you would treat any other human being.

***NOTE:** This article in its original form was written by Dennis Cannon, Consultant to the Southern California Rapid Transit District, as an introduction to staff who would be participating in their accessible bus program. Disability Rights California Senior Attorney Margaret Jakobson updated the article.*