

Disability style guide

At Ageing Better we use the social model of disability, which is a way of viewing the world, developed by Disabled people.

The model says that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. Barriers can be physical, like driveways without dropped kerbs. Or they can be caused by people's attitudes, like assuming Disabled people can't do certain things.

This means that we should refer to *Disabled people*, not *people with disabilities*.

Using the word *Disabled* before *people* signifies identification with a collective cultural identity, and capitalising *Disabled* emphasises the term's political significance.

Disabled people is an example of 'identity-first language' which is also preferred by people in the disability movement to describe specific impairments (e.g. visually impaired person), and by many neurodivergent people (e.g. autistic person). It should usually be the default language used where possible, as it reflects that someone's impairment is part of their identity, for example someone is autistic rather than has autism. However, where individuals prefer to describe themselves using 'person-first language', e.g. as a person with a visual impairment, that should be respected when referring to that person only.

Some conditions are more usually described using 'person-first language', particularly those associated with mental health conditions and learning difficulties e.g. *person with Down syndrome*.

In the UK, *learning disability* is commonly used to describe a general intellectual impairment, whereas *learning difficulty* is used to describe a specific difficulty with learning such as dyslexia. However, sometimes these are used interchangeably, and some organisations – notably People First (self advocacy) – and individuals, prefer to use *people with learning difficulties* to describe people with general intellectual impairments. Similarly *mental health conditions* is the preferred term used by Disability Rights UK, although other terms are used by other disability rights organisations and individuals. MIND and Mental Health Foundation, for example, use *mental health problems*, and *issues* is also acceptable.

Avoid negative associations (such as *suffering from*) and use *has, with, experiencing* or *living with* (e.g. *someone experiencing psychosis, person living with HIV*). Similarly, use *wheelchair user* not *wheelchair bound*. Never use *the disabled* or *the blind* as this dehumanizes people. The opposite of *Disabled* is *non-disabled* (not *able-bodied*).

Be careful to not conflate *disability* with *health*, or use the term in a negative way (e.g. *risk factors for disease and disability*). At Ageing Better, we sometimes use *disability-free life expectancy* as an equality measure. This should be used with care to avoid the implication that life with a disability is less valuable than life without.

Some deaf people identify as Disabled, but many in the British Sign Language community identify as a cultural minority and do not view deafness as an impairment. In this community Deaf is used with a capital *D* to identify their cultural identity. *D/deaf* may be used as an inclusive term for hearing impaired people who are not part of the Deaf community and those who are. Similarly *Deaf and Disabled* may be used as an inclusive term to include Deaf people who do not identify as disabled.

Language around disability is changing as a greater diversity of Deaf and Disabled people are becoming involved in rights movements. It's important to be led by people in Deaf and Disabled rights movements on the language we use now and in the future.

Useful resources:

General

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability>
- <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language>
- <https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/system/files/GMEqAI%20Inclusive%20Language%20Slides%202.%20DISABILITY.pdf>

Mental health

- <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/7582/mental-health-language.pdf>
- https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/2601/house_style_guide.pdf

Neurodiversity

- <https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/gmeqal-inclusive-language-guidance>

Deaf community

- <https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/about-us/disability-in-london/cultural-model-of-deafness/the-cultural-model-of-deafness>