

L a n g u a g e A s s e s s m e n t

A positive attitude toward people with disabilities is important. One way to determine your attitude is through your language. Your words, while not intended to be negative, may be interpreted by people with disabilities as negative, or even insulting.

Assess your language by choosing the better phrase of each item numbered below. The answers and explanations follow.

Choose the better phrase:

1. The Johnson's next-door-neighbor is an epileptic.
 The Johnson's' next-door-neighbor, Bill, has epilepsy.
2. I met with John last week. Did you know that he has a mobility impairment?
 I met with John last week. Did you know that he is crippled?
3. The blind have an active consumer group in our state.
 People who are blind have an active consumer group in our state.
4. Mary is afflicted with muscular dystrophy.
 Mary has muscular dystrophy.
5. I have 21 cases with epilepsy.
 I have 21 clients with epilepsy.
6. Bill is a victim of polio and is confined to a wheelchair.
 Bill has polio and is a wheelchair user.

Discussion

While these phrases are appropriate for learning exercises in language use, it should be remembered that it's not necessary to describe a person in terms of his or her disability, unless it is relevant to the conversation.

1. The second phrase is better. People with a disability are often stereotyped as having a "personality type." The first phrase suggests that Bill has a prescribed set of personality characteristics because he is "an epileptic." Avoid presenting physical characteristics as a determining factor of the personality. The focus should be on the person and his or her uniqueness.

2. The first phrase is better. In referring to a specific disability, avoid terms that are offensive. Using terms like retard, schizo, spastic, cripple and dumb are insulting and degrading. Preferred terminology is: people who are mentally disabled, who are emotionally disabled, who have cerebral palsy and who have speech impairments.

3. The second phrase is better. A common use of offensive terminology occurs when an adjective that describes a disability is used as a noun. This implies that the person is the disability. For example, the term "the blind" implies that blindness is the predominate characteristic rather than only one aspect of the person.

4. The second phrase is better. Some words, such as "afflicted" and "patient," foster the notion that people with disabilities are ill. A disability is not contagious. You can't "catch" it like you can a cold. Although some people with disabilities have accompanying health problems, our language should not promote the fallacy that people with disabilities have an illness and should be avoided.

5. The second phrase is better. It is offensive to refer to a person with a disability as a "case." It is dehumanizing to be considered a set of records or an object to be dealt with. The first phrase is not intended to insult, but it does. It depersonalizes the individual.

6. The second phrase is better. Some terms have a negative meaning and distort the reality of the disability. For example, a person is not confined by a wheelchair, but most likely liberated by a wheelchair. A person is not dying with cancer, but rather living with cancer. Other phrases, such as "victim of" and "suffering from," imply that the person leads a life of despair. Most people with disabilities are not saddened or preoccupied with their disability. They may do things differently than a person who is non-disabled, but with the same result or with equal participation.