

TIC project of Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in MSF

Editorial guidance

Note: This short editorial guidance is complementary to the TIC project's glossary. The purpose is to support mainstreaming of inclusion in our communications and speaking out through correct and consistent use of disability-related terms. The guidance is a living document that will be further developed and modified as the needs for communication on disability and inclusion in MSF evolve. For any questions or feedback, contact Sanni Myllyaho at sanni.myllyaho@helsinki.msf.org.

General advice:

- **Use person-first language:** always put a person before a disability or a diagnosis, describing what a person “has”, “experiences” or “has been diagnosed with”, rather than stating what a person “is”. This helps avoid dehumanisation of people living with a disability or with a chronic illness.
- **When in doubt, ask** people with disabilities, their caregivers or a local organisation representative of person with disabilities about the preferred wording. This will help you choose terms that persons with disabilities can identify with and that do not contribute to further stigmatisation.
- **Tune in to the context** for a more nuanced communication: depending on the local culture, perceptions of disability and preferred terms can vary widely. For example, the UAE refers to the people with specific needs or disabilities as “people of determination”¹, in recognition of their stamina and achievements.
- **Make the barriers visible.** By making the barriers visible, you're highlighting that that the problem is not the impairment but the disabling barriers in society that hinder people with disabilities. For example, a patient drops out of school because the school is inaccessible, not because their legs have been amputated.²
- **Avoid inspiration porn.** Persons with disabilities don't do their day-to-day activities to inspire persons without disabilities. Be careful not to turn persons with disabilities into superheroes for just showing up like everybody else. Idolizing persons with disabilities in this manner is commonly referred to as "inspiration porn."
- **Disability is not an illness.** Be careful not to confuse disability with an illness, even though the two might be connected. For instance, an impairment may be the consequence of illness (fistula, leprosy, cataract, diabetes), and illness may be a consequence of an impairment (pressure soar due to being a wheelchair user).

Use	Don't use	Note
Caregiver	Caretaker	When referring to someone who supports a person with a disability – whether it is a relative, a friend, or a professional – “caregiver” is the preferred term.
Condition	Disorder	Use the word “condition” or, whenever possible, refer to a concrete diagnosis.

¹ <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/special-needs>

² This is the human rights based approach to disability. It focuses on identifying and removing barriers that block inclusion. This definition of disability comes from the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Congenital condition, congenital disability	Birth defect	The word “defect” brings attention to what is seen as imperfection or lack. It is better to replace the term “birth defect” with “congenital condition” or “congenital disability”. Alternative and more descriptive ways of referring to someone with a congenital disability: “person who has had a disability since birth” or “person who was born with a disability”.
Deaf, Deaf person	Deaf and dumb, deaf-mute, dumb	The terms “deaf and dumb” and “deaf-mute” were used in the past to describe a person who was deaf and using sign language or a deaf person unable to speak. Today, they are considered derogatory, and the preferred term is “deaf”. Note that deafness is one form of hearing impairment, but not all persons who are hard of hearing are deaf.
Deaf (uppercase) versus deaf (lowercase)		We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a sign language and a culture.
Deafblind, Deafblind person		The correct term for a person with both hearing and vision impairment.
Developmental disability, cognitive disability, intellectual disability	Mental handicap, mental retardation	While “developmental disability” is acceptable, it is an umbrella term, so it might be best to use the name of the specific disability whenever possible.
Disability, person with a disability	Handicap, handicapped	Avoid using “handicap” and “handicapped”. Instead, refer to the person’s specific condition or use “person with a disability.”
Experience, live with, sustain	Suffer from	Describing a person with a disability as “suffering” from their condition presents them as a victim who needs to be pitied; it fits into the charity approach to disability, while in MSF we strongly advocate for a rights-based approach ³ . When referring to a person who has acquired a disability due to trauma, it is preferred to say that they have “sustained” injuries, as again, “suffer” implies that an injured person is a victim.
Hard of hearing	Hearing-impaired	
Mental health hospital, psychiatric hospital		Preferred terms to describe medical facilities devoted to treating people with mental health conditions.
Non-disabled, person who does not have a disability, person without a disability	Able-bodied, normal person	The terms “able-bodied” or “normal” are sometimes incorrectly used as antonyms of “person with a disability”.
Non-responsive	Vegetative state	Avoid the term “vegetative state”, unless you are using it in a strictly medical sense and context, to describe a condition in which a person is awake but is showing no signs of awareness.
Person who has paraplegia	Paraplegic	Avoid referring to an individual as a paraplegic. Instead, say that the person has paraplegia.

³ For an explanation of different approaches to disability, consult the Glossary of disability and inclusion-related terms.

Person with a brain injury, person with a traumatic brain injury	Brain damaged	
Person with a disability	Disabled person	With disabilities and chronic conditions, use person-first language.
Person with a disability	Differently-abled, DisAbility, person with special abilities	Using euphemisms is often seen as condescending, and it only stigmatizes persons with disabilities further.
Person with a mental disability	Mentally retarded	
Person with a physical disability, person who has sustained serious injuries	Cripple, crippled	
Person with a visual impairment, person with limited vision, person with low vision; partially sighted	Visually impaired	
Person with cerebral palsy, person who has spastic cerebral palsy	Spastic	
Person with Down syndrome	Mongoloid	
Person with schizophrenia, person living with schizophrenia, person diagnosed with schizophrenia	Schizophrenic	
Specific needs, functional needs, requirements	Special needs	The terms “specific needs” and “functional needs” are preferred when describing persons with disabilities or programmes designed to support them.
Support	Care	To “care” for someone implies a power imbalance – that the person being cared for is incapable. To say that a person with disabilities may require “support” is more accurate and empowering: it recognises that a person can be supported to achieve their goals.
Wheelchair user, a person who uses a wheelchair	Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	Avoid “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair-bound”. These terms describe a person in relationship to a piece of equipment and focus on limitations, ignoring the fact that a wheelchair is a device that enables mobility.
	Abnormal, abnormality	Both words can be used in medical contexts, for instance when describing test results or “an abnormal curvature of the spine”. When used to describe a person, they are considered derogatory.
	Deformed, deformity	“Deformed” should never be used to describe a person. While it can be used in some contexts (e.g. to describe a “deformed limb”), it is better to avoid it and replace it by a description of the condition.
	Disfigured, disfigurement	Avoid the word “disfigured”. Describe instead the physical changes the person has sustained.

	High/low functioning	Instead of describing a person as “high functioning” or “low functioning”, use medical diagnoses and point to an individual’s abilities and challenges.
	Invalid	“Invalid” is considered derogatory; avoid it.

Resources that have inspired this guidance, and further reading:

- TIC project of Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in MSF, *Glossary of disability and inclusion-related terms for internal and external communications*.
- [Disability Inclusive Language Guideline](#) by UN (2021).
- World Health Organization. (2001). [International classification of functioning, disability and health](#) (ICF).
- World Health Organization. (2011). [World report on disability](#).
- National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ), Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Arizona State University, [Disability Language Style Guide](#).
- NCDJ, [Writing and editing](#).
- American Psychological Association, [Style and Grammar Guidelines – Bias-free language – Disability](#).
- Disabled People’s Association, Singapore, [Glossary of Disability Terminology. The Essential Guide to Words and Phrases Acceptable to People with Disabilities](#), 2015.