**Who Are People with Disabilities?**

For the most part, people with disabilities are ordinary individuals seeking to live ordinary lives. They are moms, dads, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, and teachers. About 45 million Americans—one out of every five individuals—have a disability. Their contributions enrich our communities and society as they live, work, and share their lives.

**Changing Images Represented:**

Historically, people with disabilities have been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared, or ignored. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, repulsive adversaries, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy, and charity cases who must depend on others for their well-being and care. Media coverage frequently focused on heartwarming features and inspirational stories that reinforced stereotypes, patronized, and underestimated individuals’ capabilities.

Much has changed lately. New laws, disability activism, and expanded coverage of disability issues have altered public awareness and knowledge, eliminating the worst stereotypes and misrepresentations. Still, old attitudes and stereotypes die hard.

People with disabilities continue to seek accurate portrayals that present a respectful, positive view of individuals as active participants of society in typical social, work, and home environments. Additionally, people with disabilities are focusing attention on tough issues that affect quality of life, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities, and discrimination.

**Eliminating Stereotypes – Words Matter!**

Every individual, regardless of sex, age, race, sexual orientation, or disability deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. As part of the effort to end discrimination and segregation—in employment, education, and our communities at large—it’s important to eliminate prejudicial language.

While some people may not use preferred terminology, it’s important you don’t repeat negative terms that stereotype, devalue, or discriminate, just as you’d avoid racial slurs or sexist labels.

Equally important, ask yourself if the disability is even relevant and needs to be mentioned when referring to individuals, in the same way racial identification is being eliminated from news stories when it is not significant.

**What Should You Say?**

Be sensitive when choosing the words you use. Here are a few guidelines on appropriate language.

- Recognize that people with disabilities are ordinary people with common goals for a home, a job, and family. Talk about people in ordinary terms.
- Never equate a person with a disability, such as referring to someone as retarded, an epileptic, or quadriplegic. These are simply medical diagnoses.
- Emphasize abilities, not limitations. Say, for example, that a man walks with crutches, not that he is crippled.
- Avoid negative words that imply tragedy, such as afflicted w/, suffers, victim, prisoner, or unfortunate.
- Recognize that a disability is not a challenge to be overcome, and don’t say people succeed in spite of a disability. Ordinary things and accomplishments do not become extraordinary just because they are done by a person with a disability. What are extraordinary are the lengths people with disabilities have to go through and the barriers they have to overcome to do the most ordinary things.
- Use *disability* to indicate a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s mental, physical, or sensory abilities. Use *accessible* to describe technologies or structures designed to fit the needs of all patrons. For example, people with disabilities who use wheelchairs are handicapped by stairs, but may use accessible ramps, accessible parking spaces, and accessible entrances.
- Do not refer to a person as bound to or confined to a wheelchair. Wheelchairs are liberating to people with disabilities.
- Do not use *special* to mean segregated, such as separate schools or buses for people with disabilities, or to suggest a disability itself makes someone special.
- Avoid cute euphemisms such as physically challenged, inconvenienced, and differently abled.
- Promote understanding, respect, dignity, and positive outlooks.

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