

7 Things NEVER to Say to People With Disabilities

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We've all heard them. Culturally insensitive terms such as "handicapped," "retarded" and "slow" used to refer to people with disabilities, or "compliments" such as "but you look so good," directed at people whose disabilities aren't obvious. While those using the terms may not mean to be insensitive, that doesn't make the words less hurtful.

"These terms are unacceptable because they are linked to a history that the general public isn't aware of," says Nancy Starnes, vice president and chief of staff for the National Organization on Disability (NOD). "And just like there are terms that you don't use for African Americans anymore, the same goes for people with disabilities."

There are approximately 11.8 million people with reported disabilities in the work force, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"As the demographics in this country shift, there are going to be more and more people with disabilities in the work force. And as long as accommodations are available, there's no reason they should not expect to continue to work," says Stern.

Here are seven other things you should not say to people with disabilities:

1. "What's wrong/what happened?" or "Were you born that way?"

People view their disabilities differently. While some people may feel comfortable discussing their conditions, these are still very personal questions. They most definitely should not be the first questions you ask when meeting someone with a disability. And what's "wrong" should never be asked.

"In the wider community, I have had perfect strangers come up to me and instead of greeting me or saying hello, they say, 'What's wrong? What happened?'," says Tim Vaughn, a rule and marketing director with Eastman Kodak Co., No. 2 on The 2008 DiversityInc Top 10 Companies for People with Disabilities and one of the 2008 DiversityInc 25 Noteworthy Companies. "When this happens, I try to set the example by suggesting we greet each other as people first."

2. "Oh, if you just have faith, you can be healed."

Suggesting that a person can be "fixed" by a religious or medical breakthrough is not only insensitive, it also discounts the diagnosis of a qualified doctor. This, for some newly diagnosed people, may make dealing with medical issues more difficult.

"Some people are problem-solvers by nature and they want to help fix what they perceive is your problem. While I appreciate where their good nature comes from, it's not the best thing to do," Vaughn says.

3. Speaking slowly or loudly to someone who is in a wheelchair.

A common misconception is that people with physical disabilities, such as a motor or sensory impairment, also have other disabilities, particularly mental disabilities.

"When people see someone in a wheelchair, they automatically begin making assumptions," says Vaughn. "From my personal perspective, if individuals see someone in a wheelchair, they immediately assume that there are multiple disabilities that the person is dealing with--mental, visual, auditory--and not just the fact that there is a mobility issue."

4. "I don't even think of you as a person with a disability."

People with disabilities and advocates debate whether this is a "compliment" or an insult; however, many warn that it can come across as degrading a person. "What they're trying to say, in their own way, is that I think of you as capable and able or even powerful," says Deb Dagit, chief diversity officer for [Merck & Co.](#) (No. 8 on [The 2009 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity®](#) list). "But it comes across just exactly like saying 'I don't think of you as a woman,' or 'as Black,' or 'as Asian,'" adds Dagit, who has brittle-bone disease.

5. "How do you go to the bathroom?"

Questioning how someone uses the restroom is a rude question--period. It can be especially offensive to a person with a disability because it assumes that person has trouble managing basic tasks. And while you may be curious about how a person with disabilities manages things, unless your coworker volunteers the information, it's really none of your business.

6. "But you look so good."

There is no doubt that in today's corporate America that keeping a good game face is important to one's success. While this can be difficult for some people with disabilities, no one wants to have his or her work discounted.

"Comparing the appearance or ability of a person with a disability to a person without a disability has the same underlying messages as saying to a women, 'Your report was well done, for a girl,'" Susan Henderson, managing director of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF), tells DiversityInc.

7. "Oh, you're here, you must feel better."

It's wrong to assume that because someone is at work, he or she is feeling better, or not affected by his or her disability that day. For people with [chronic or "invisible" illnesses](#), becoming accustomed to living with the disability is a necessary part of an individual's day-to-day life.