

# Reach Out To People With Disabilities | CPD

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Forty years ago in many major U.S. cities, a person with an obvious physical disability could be fined up to \$50 simply for leaving home.

The Chicago Municipal Code included this ordinance: *“No person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person to be allowed in or on the public ways or other public places in this city, or shall therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under a penalty of not less than one dollar nor more than fifty dollars for each offense.”* (Wikipedia)

The difference between the past, the present and the future is, literally, a few moments. We are all only a single moment away from a car accident, a stroke, a chromosomal anomaly at conception that could leave any one of us with a permanent disability.

But in that singular moment, is the change so profound that we can no longer be called a person, but become instead an *unsightly or disgusting object*? Surely we retain our inherent worth as human beings who breathe and think and feel, even if our physical bodies may not work the way they used to.

My cousin, Dennis, experienced his singular moment on a battlefield in Korea. My parents said he was never “quite right” after he came back from the war. As a 10-year-old, I thought he was weird and creepy. Nobody ever tried to help me understand our differences, or the ways in which we would always be the same. Perhaps they didn’t know how.

Another cousin, Greg, experienced his moment before birth. Retarded, my parents said. I never met Greg. No photographs exist of him. Family members never spoke of him. He lived and died in an institution.

When I was a child, the word ‘retarded’ was used to describe the clinical diagnosis of a person with an intellectual disability. But language changes. Terminology changes. Stephen Pinker, in his 2003 book *The Blank Slate*, coined the term ‘euphemism treadmill’ for the

process in which words introduced to replace an offensive word eventually become offensive themselves.

For people with intellectual disabilities and their families, the word ‘retarded’ has become hurtful and its use, malicious. Today, it is no longer a clinical diagnosis. The latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders replaced the term ‘mental retardation’ with ‘intellectual disability.’

But it still pops up—in casual conversation, in current movies and almost certainly on social media. If you absolutely must insult someone, there are far more creative ways to do it than to use this particular word. If you didn’t realize how hurtful it is, now you know better, and can do better.

Before I started working at the Center for Persons with Disabilities, I had a passing familiarity with People First language, which asks us to acknowledge the person before the disability as a token of respect for their humanity. I have to admit, though, that as a writer, I found it cumbersome. It takes twice as many words to write ‘a child on the autism spectrum’ rather than ‘an autistic child,’ and writing headlines becomes challenging.

Now, however, I do see the person before I see the disability, so it’s no longer an issue of a few extra words. Of course, there is always the danger of offending someone, no matter how sincere your attempt to show respect. For some people, their identity is one and the same with their disability. And that’s OK.

If you don’t know, listen to the person with whom you’re interacting. If they refer to themselves as a disabled person, it’s probably safe for you to do the same. If you’re still not sure, ask.

Know better. Do better.

Historically, we’ve tried to fix people with disabilities. If we couldn’t fix them, we supported exclusion and segregation, as we did with people like my cousin Greg. Sometimes we banned people with disabilities from being seen in public, as we did with Chicago’s so-called ‘ugly law.’

People with disabilities were once expected to die young and to achieve little. They were—and often still are—perceived as vulnerable and dependent, who need someone to take care of them. But disability has existed throughout history. It is a natural and normal part of the human experience. And given the opportunity, people with disabilities can achieve their own successes.

People who don't regularly interact with individuals with disabilities, however, rarely think about disability. It won't ever happen to us, we say, as we avoid thinking about that one singular moment that any of us could experience. We avoid the unknown, anyone who is different, who is not like us. We're afraid to reach out.

There's a solution to that.

Reach out. Confront the vague fear that accompanies the unknown. Connect with a person who is more like you than different from you. Yes, you may say something wrong. It's possible you might do something that embarrasses you. But your perspective will undoubtedly become a little wider, a little broader, a little more flexible.

We have all done the best we could, but now we know better. Let's do better.

*Sue Reeves is the public relations specialist at the CPD. This article first appeared in the March 23, 2014 edition of The Herald Journal, Logan, Utah with the headline, "Soapbox: Showing sensitivity to persons with disabilities."*