

Clinician’s Guide for Respectful Communication About Persons With a Disability

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Nearly 1 in 4 adults in Ohio has a disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹ Ohioans with disabilities are more likely to have cardiovascular disease and related risk factors (e.g., obesity, diabetes, tobacco use) than Ohioans without a disability.¹ The ability of health care providers to communicate in respectful language that reduces the stigma of disability and other chronic conditions is essential to building trust. Trust is necessary to ensure patients’ good health outcomes, satisfaction with providers, and long-term patient loyalty.^{2,3}

Identity-first language is based on the disability, whereas person-first language puts the disability after the person.²⁻⁶ Different people prefer identity-first versus person-first language.⁵



Identity-First Language

“I have a stroke patient in my panel.”



Person-First Language

“I have a person with a stroke in my panel.”

4 Tips for Communicating About Persons With a Disability Among Your Care Team

1. Ask individuals about their language preferences. Avoid making assumptions about preferences for identity-first versus person-first language.⁵
2. Use person-first descriptors, such as *“person with a disability,”* and emphasize abilities using terms such as *“uses a wheelchair.”* Avoid euphemisms for disability, such as *“handicapped”* or *“differently-abled.”* These may make those who are not disabled more comfortable by downplaying disability, but they can be disempowering.²⁻⁶
3. Use phrases such as *“nondisabled”* or *“person without disabilities.”* Using terms such as *“healthy”* or *“normal”* to describe a person without disabilities is problematic, as the terms imply that persons with disabilities are unhealthy or abnormal.²⁻⁶
4. Avoid using stories of the achievements of individuals with disabilities as sources of feel-good inspiration or portraying successful individuals with disabilities as long-suffering, heroic individuals overcoming extreme odds.²⁻⁴ Persons with disabilities vary in their accomplishments and challenges.³

For more information, access Cardi-OH’s expanded resources on [language tools to decrease stigma](#) and [disability and equitable health care](#).

References

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