

How to Talk About People With MS & Disabilities



Words are powerful; what we say and how we say it can either put people first and help them feel understood, or inadvertently reflect and perpetuate stereotypes and negative attitudes.

When speaking to someone living with a disability, you may feel unsure of how to approach the conversation – you may find yourself worried you’re saying the “wrong thing.”

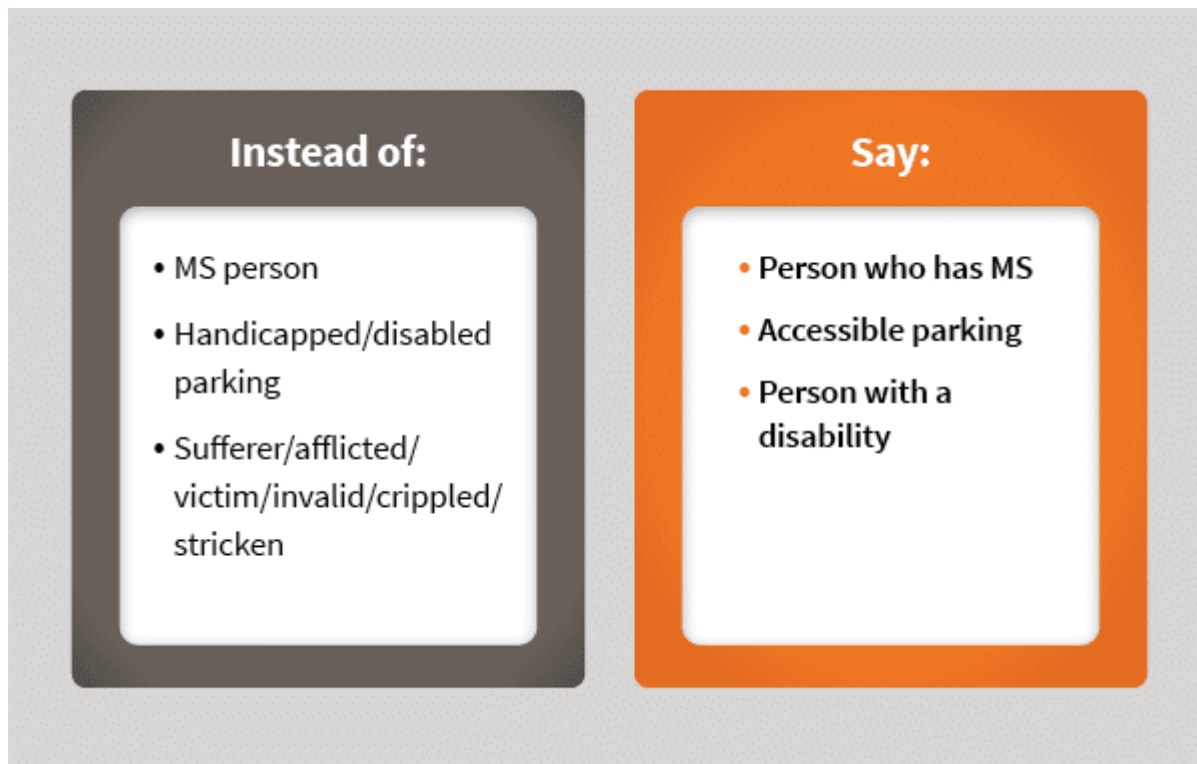
Here are 5 tips to keep in mind when speaking about or to those in the MS community living with a disability.

1. Sincerity and honesty go a long way

When speaking to someone living with a disability, relax and enjoy the uniqueness of the individual as you would any other person. Do not get caught up in worrying about using normal, colloquial phrases like “take a walk,” “run an errand,” or “see you later” – just be yourself and carry on a conversation!

2. The person always comes before the disability

Using person-first words help individuals to be seen first as people and not as their health condition.



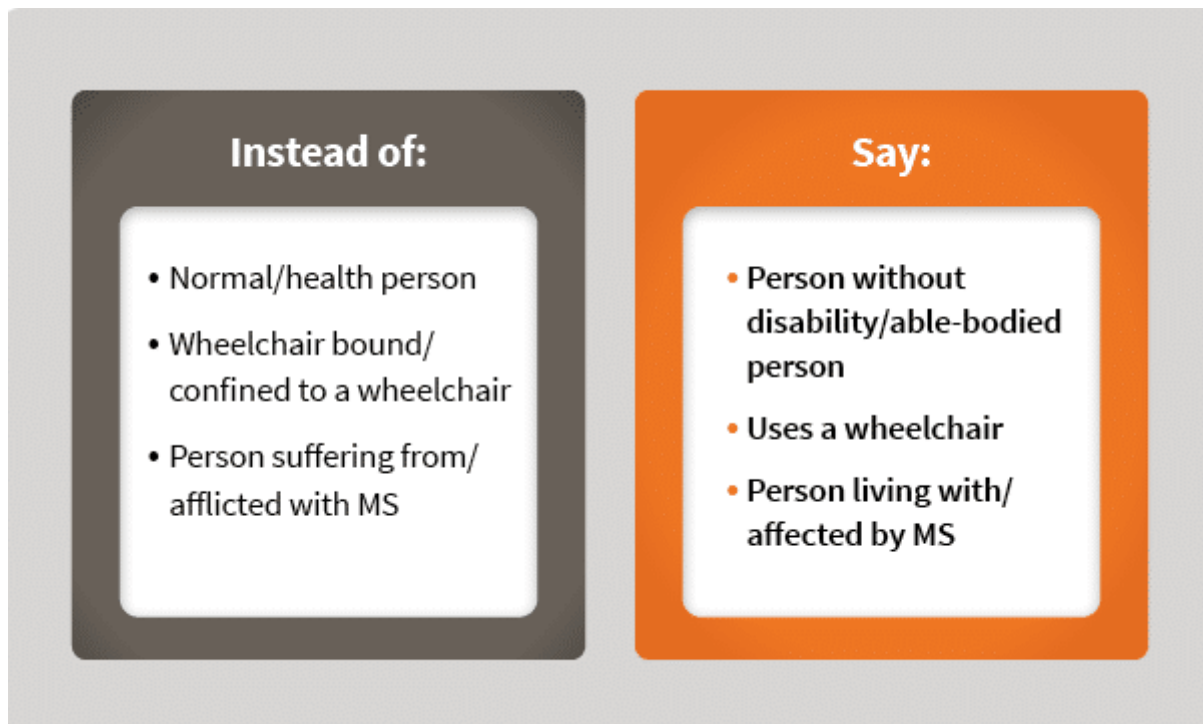
3. Use language that challenges discrimination and stereotypes

Some common phrases reinforce prejudices and assumptions about those living with disabilities.

Below are some common stereotypes to avoid:

- People living with disabilities are “courageous”
- People’s lives are ruined by disease or disability
- Disability or MS dominates a person’s life
- Disease or disability was caused by something the person did or did not do

Remember that disability, handicap and being sick are not synonymous. In line with tip number 2, focus and see someone for their character and what they say, not their disability and pre-judgements you may have about disability.



4. Be inclusive - people with disabilities are not a homogenous group

Just like disability is not always visible, neither is ability – don't make assumptions about what people can or cannot do based on what you see or what you think you know. Disability is a spectrum, and with a disease as unpredictable as MS that affects people of all races, genders, ethnicities and age groups, actively challenge your own assumptions (as discussed in tip 3).

5. Language is constantly evolving

Not everyone agrees on what language is appropriate and what is not – even what is in this blog! Disability language and etiquette are about respect, common sense and courtesy, all of which can change with cultural norms, situations and the person you're speaking with.

When in doubt, remember: lead with honesty and sincerity. It's OK to earnestly ask someone how they'd liked to be addressed and that will go a long way.