

Sometimes “Political Correctness” Just Means Seeing People for Who They Are



My neighbor and I have been friends for 30 years. I have no doubt that she holds me to a high regard, as I do her. But when she asked me if I had a hard time being “crippled,” I literally felt a chill run through my body.

I have MS, and I use a cane or walker to get around. In my mind, that does not make me “crippled.” But even if I was unable to walk at all without a mobility device, I would still feel uncomfortable being referred to by that term. It conjures up an image of helplessness that is not only inaccurate, but robs me of my dignity.

Am I being overly sensitive? Perhaps. And it fortunately doesn’t really matter in this case, because I know her and where she’s coming from.

But in being uncomfortable, am I also trying to be “politically correct?” These days, those are fighting words. The phrase can mean a lot of things, but it is now often used to poke fun at people who are trying to be attentive to diversity and sensitive about how hurtful words can be.

Let’s take a closer look at some of the emerging language that is meant to cast a less-judgmental light on people with disabilities. Call it “politically correct” if you must, but please don’t let that phrase keep you from seeing the broader purpose here.

If I describe someone as “wheelchair-bound,” I am instantly (if inadvertently) defining them

by what they **can't** do. If, by contrast, I refer to the individual as a "wheelchair user," that is simply stating a fact without conjuring up a pitiful or judgmental image.

There is often no need to describe a person by first referring to their disability ("That wheelchair-using student won the spelling bee."). This is why people with disabilities advocate for "people first" language: Identify the person before you identify their disability. And just as with race, it's frequently unnecessary to refer to their disability at all.

These may seem like trivial issues, but it is our common discourse that helps mold the self-image of the people we are talking about. And for me and most of the people with disabilities that I know, we would like to be thought of first as who we are, not what we have.

For more information, [click here.](#)