

Random Person: Person in a wheelchair.

Random Person: Person in a wheelchair.

Random Person: Wheelchair user

Random Person: Handicap.

Random Person: I would say wheelchair user.

Random Person: Person in a wheelchair.

Random Person: Wheelchair user

Me: People first language is a way to refer to people who have disabilities. For example, you would want to say person in a wheelchair or a girl who is deaf. When we use people first language as the name suggests, we're identifying a human as a human before anything else. What we want to avoid are words like wheelchair bound or disabled man. This makes the disability the focus instead of the person. Using people first language is just one of the many ways we can improve how society treats people with disabilities.

Me: Hello, I'm Mimi and welcome back to my podcast about disabilities. This is the second episode of a series of three, and today we'll be talking about how language affects men with physical disabilities. I wanted to bring awareness to how damaging words can be and how we as a society can be better allies to people with disabilities. While I don't condone the use of the word retarded, I will be saying the word in its entirety for the purpose of education in this podcast episode. According to Oxford languages, the word retarded or the r – slur means quote less advanced in mental, physical, or social development than, as usual for one's age or foolish or stupid. End quote. Next to the definition, there's a side note that says that the term retarded is offensive and dated. I drove to meet Mike Longo, one of the Moose hockey players who we met in the last episode, and I asked him his opinion on our vocabulary usage. How are you today?

Mike Longo: I'm doing well. It's a cold Friday.

Me: What do you do for work?

Mike Longo: For work. I have a clean energy startup that I'm working on.

Me: You also skate with the Moose hockey team? Right?

Mike Longo: Yes.

Me: Awesome.

Me: I asked Mike about his experience with the word retarded.

Mike Longo: I don't hear it in reference to people who actually have a mental disability. I hear it more in terms of referring to people who do silly things or who do silly things themselves, but that obviously doesn't make it okay.

Me: So you kind of said earlier that there was a lack of education. So what do you think would be a good way to spread the knowledge of not using derogatory words?

Mike Longo: Honestly, the best way, I think, would be for more people to do things like sled hockey and interacting with people with disabilities. Probably my favorite guy at our sled hockey skates is Kurt. Right. And Kurt has a disability. A mental disability. I just can't imagine using that word after spending a couple of weeks with Kurt. I mean, he is just a **treat** to be around, and I think that's the best way to get people to understand the significance of using words like that.

Me: I also met with Drew Akins, another Moose hockey player, and asked him about language.

Drew Akins: I work with youth hockey players in Jackson Hole. I run a couple of travel teams, and I do clinics and private lessons and through the youth program, and I also have a day job as a personal assistant. I keep pretty busy, but I do a lot for the youth hockey program here when I can

Me: Here Drew beautifully states how society views offensive words.

Drew Akins: I think if you were to... not like rank words, or severity of those words. But I think retarded is lower on the totem pole than the N word or whatever. And I think that's how society views it, because if you said the N word in a crowded place, everyone would look at you. But if you said retarded in a crowded place, I think a lot of people wouldn't even bat an eye. They'd just be like... they wouldn't think anything of it.

Me: During a conversation with Jackson Hole, Wyoming community member Mari Allan Hanna, I asked her about her experience with the R word.

Mari Allan: I don't know if I've heard a person use that word recently. I hear it in old television if you're watching an old movie or... I do hear that word. And I have learned to hear that as something that we don't use anymore because it was definitely commonplace throughout my lifetime. So I think that's been a good shift. Yeah. And I

would like more education on what we want the language to be and what direction we want to go in.

Me: I spoke to Joe Stone, director of mission for Teton Adaptive and a C seven partial quadriplegic, about his thoughts on language.

Joe Stone: I don't hear the R-word too often, but it's still around. So it's interesting. I hear it from older generation that... when it was like normal to use that word, it's really hard to get people to change the way they talk. So older generations that have used that word throughout their whole life as a descriptive way to say something's dumb or whatever, I hear it there, and then there's like this large gap of people that weren't using that in their childhood and know not to say it. But then I get around other people that are like ski bums, for example, or parading pilots that they're just not socially cued in on all the right things to say and all that. And I started hearing it again in those crowds. Like I said, it's not super common, but enough... I called out most of the time.

Sometimes I'm just not trying to make an awkward situation, or sometimes it's not worth my time. Like I'm seeing this person one time, I'm never going to see them again. And it's maybe not the right thing to not say anything, but sometimes it just gets old having to try to correct people all the time. Because getting people like we were saying earlier, getting them to change their language is hard. I do wish people would try harder, but from my perspective if somebody is trying to learn something new, Oh, I didn't know the R-word was even bad because I run into that. They're like, I had no idea. They'd never been taught that. Like, cool. And it's the next time they say it and I've seen it where they're like, they'll use the R word and they'll catch themselves and be like, oh, man, I didn't mean to say that. I'll do better, whatever. That's where the progress is at. That's awesome. You just recognize that what you were doing wasn't the right thing to do and you're trying to correct that. But again, it's context. So if somebody is... if they learn the R word is bad, then they go around using it to be mean or to go against what they just learned then. Now that's a different story. Now they're just being a jerk.

Me: Talking to Mike Longo and Drew Akins, I wanted to hear their thoughts on using people first language. As I mentioned in the beginning of this episode, people first language, as the name suggests, is referring to someone as a person before anything else.

Me: So again, because our language is constantly changing, there's a way to refer to people with disabilities, and that is by using people first language. Have you ever heard of that before?

Mike Longo: Yeah, just yesterday when I used the term handicap. It's hard. And I'm even struggling with it now because person first language is like, you say person with disability. Right. And that's not as easy to say as some other things. So I struggle sometimes when I'm in a sentence and I'm trying to describe somebody who has a disability, I struggle to kind of fit that into the syntax of the sentence.

Me: Here's an awesome solution that Drew thought of that would help society be better at using people first language and being more aware of how our language affects others.

Drew Akins: I think use it in schools, like, educate people early on because I think if you're yeah... I mean, you can use like we were talking about before the social media and getting word out there and stuff. But ultimately, schools reach everyone. And I think you have to teach kids starting at a really young age, so it sinks in right away and then make sure it's not just like one of those things they just learn. And then it's that curriculum, that one year it's over. Continue on and make sure that it's being taught every year at every age and every grade. So I think education system, I think, would be the best place to go to first.

Me: Mari Allan Hanna brought up a great question.

Mari Allan Hanna: Well, I love what you were just describing as letting people tell everyone else how they want to be referred to. So maybe hearing from people who have dealt with this discrimination and this kind of labeling, having them tell their stories about the negative impacts and then what their preference is now and why that's their preference. I feel like that would be really powerful just hearing their voices and hearing firsthand how I might be able to be a better citizen of their community.

Me: Her question was answered by John Zendler. Here, John talks about words that he'd prefer not to hear anymore.

Me: How are you today?

John Zendler: Great.

Me: That's good. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

John Zendler: Yeah. I am a chiropractor. I've lived in Jackson, Wyoming for 27 years. In 2015, I went to go have a knee replacement. Unfortunately, it got infected. Spent over a year on IV antibiotics. The infection was not going away. Unfortunately, I had to have an

above the knee amputation. I since then have tried to get back to my normal activities as much as I can. I still ski, I still cycle, and I've become a board member and now chair of an organization called Teton Adaptive, which works with people that have disabilities to get them outside and join their recreation.

I really don't like the word disabled or that disabled person. I think people that have disabilities, they do have some lack of ability, but they have special different abilities. You can see I really don't like that word. I think it really doesn't do much to describe the person who is disabled. If anything, it's more derogatory than being a word that describes who that person is.

Me: When I talked to him, he said that he'd rather people say person with a different ability level. What I learned from talking to four different people about disability is that everyone is different and that we're all individuals. For instance, as Joe will describe in a second are words that he thinks are outdated and emphasizes why people first language is the best option. When referring to people, Joe also describes why he'd like the disability community to embrace the word disabled instead of thinking it's a negative term.

Joe Stone: But other things I hear a lot is like wheelchair bound or handicapped. Those are pretty outdated and I'm not bound to my wheelchair. I choose to get in and out of it every single day, and it's my freedom. It's how I get around. So if you want to see me bound to something like take the wheelchair away and I'm pretty bound to whatever I'm in at that moment if I don't have my wheelchair next to me. So that's one that most people are pretty over hearing at this point. Handicap, same thing, really outdated. I think the safest thing is to say people with disabilities or person with a disability. I don't personally like all the new ones that are coming out that are like, handicapable and differently abled and all that, because I also am a person with a disability and I'm proud to be a person with a disability and I don't need to hide that through language. So I'm okay. If someone says I'm a person with a disability, they call me disabled. Yeah, you're right. I'm a C, seven quadriplegic. I use a wheelchair full-time. I am, that doesn't mean a bad thing. So my goal is to get the word disability, to not have a negative vibe attached to it within the disability community. Because there's a lot of people that just don't want to be called disabled or anything that leads to them saying that they might be less-abled in some way. I think the more people can be proud of their situation, no matter what it is, then there's just better energy within the community all around.

Me: Pierre Bergman, a T seven paraplegic, also gives his thoughts on words that he doesn't want to hear and how others can determine what makes a word negative or not.

Pierre Bergman: The worst word they could use is a cripple, and I doubt anyone's like that dumb to use that word in front of me. I use it all the time... there's really weird times in society where words are, like, extremely powerful. But words have to mean something, too. You need something to describe... Something isn't even like... I'm going to get in trouble. Something isn't right. But my legs don't work right... in the word disabilities. I don't know. To me, it's not a dirty word. We need words to describe something, and especially if you just take power into the word and don't make it into something negative. Words are so tricky. Yes. I think if we keep using it, we'll give more power to it in a less negative way. Based on my friend CP, we've had this conversation before, and she thinks it's like a lot of the parents. Right. The people who don't maybe experience disability first hand, people around them don't like some of the words used. So I think parents a lot or parents of kids with disabilities would try to use these different words differently abled. And it's just like, it's okay, we can use disabled. Not a big deal. Let's just figure out what we want to use and we can start... I feel like every minority group has had to deal with this. Like, what do you want to be called? Because after a while we know what you don't want to be called. Right? Don't call me the R word. Yeah, I guess. Don't try to use those other words, which is fine. I'm disabled. Not a big deal. Not a bad word for me.

Joe Stone: Language is hard. I don't put a lot of energy into language because I just think, one, there's bigger things to deal with, bigger issues to be more strict about. But also I recognize how it's really hard to change language, and so that just takes time. That's where awareness comes in.

Me: A question that seems to come up a lot is how to ask someone who has a disability about their disability. Let's start here, though, with an example of how not to ask from Pierre.

Pierre Bergman: Oh, my God. It actually happened... at the post office. I was like, just going to pick up my package and the post office lady, she's like, what happened?... That's definitely **not** the right word combination to be like, *what happened?* It's like, **none of your business**. I literally said, like, **Goodbye**, give me my package. What the *heck? I don't know you. What happened?* Yeah, that was like one of the most rude, like, the most direct anyone ever was, unless we're friends. Right.

Me: We'll be hearing a conversation that I had with Joe and Pierre separately combined into one answer about why asking someone about their disability can be disrespectful.

Joe Stone: Yeah, well, people want to ask because they're curious. Right. I get that. What I would like people to understand is they could be asking somebody about the

worst day of their life ever and that they're still traumatized by, you could be bringing up some really negative feelings that somebody hasn't quite worked through yet. They haven't quite accepted their situation yet. They haven't quite accepted the level of trauma they went through. Or there could just be a lot of scars attached to asking how and why somebody uses a wheelchair or has a different disability or walks different, or speaks different, or whatever. So I think people should tread lightly on that one because it's simply just your curiosity. But most often it's not people trying to learn about disability. They just want to learn the story. Right. To me, I don't look at it as, like spreading awareness. Yeah, I crashed paragliding. Right. That's not saying anything about disability. All it's doing is saying paragliding is dangerous. And this is what can happen if you make the wrong moves.

I think if people just look at it like other very sensitive topics that people won't normally ask other individuals about. Look at it like, if you're having a good conversation and getting to know someone and you actually know their name now and it feels right and comfortable and the conversations kind of going in that direction, then, yeah, maybe say, hey, if you don't mind me asking, and you can totally deny me if you want, like, not going to hurt my feelings. If you don't mind me asking, why do you use a wheelchair or whatever the disability is? But it needs to feel right. And so if inside, when you're about to ask that question, if there's something, if your gut is kind of fighting you on that one, like, this is kind of weird. You might not want to ask that. It might be uncomfortable. Whatever. You probably just keep it to yourself.

Pierre Bergman: It's an awkward question. Yeah, exactly. Do you feel icky? Yeah, there's probably a reason for that. So don't... just think about why it makes you feel icky instead of asking me. And again, there's different ways to find out, like, this stuff's not all a secret.

Joe Stone: And then there's other people that are, like, born with their disabilities, and that's when we're like, what are they supposed to go their whole life explaining from birth to whenever like explaining that. Also, I don't think people understand how often those questions are thrown out, whether they think it or not. I think there's kind of this energy of, like, not recognizing how often people are actually being asked that question. You might be the fifth person that day to ask that same question. Let's say you've got a scar on your face that you're really self-conscious about. But everywhere you go, someone's asking you, how did you get that scar on your face? And now let's say that scar has a lot of trauma wrapped around it. Something really negative happened to you that developed that scar, but every day you got to tell somebody about this really negative thing that happened five times a day. You're having to say that. That makes it hard for people to move on, like repeating it over and over again. I wish people would

recognize that a little bit more that you might be the fifth person that day, 20th that week asking that same question to a person who is still really struggling with whatever their situation is.

Pierre Bergman: Also, the other thing is we don't want that to be the first thing that you guys think of. I get it. It's front of mine, especially. My disability is very obvious. It's tangible. It's like, okay, I would say don't ask. To be honest, I've been super honest about my injury, and there are a lot of places in public on Instagram and Facebook. You can just do a couple of scrolls. You'll find really quickly how I got hurt and everything. You can know. You can know what my anniversaries are. I'll put it out there. So maybe don't ask me in person and it'll come up. Someone will make that mistake. And then in a group setting, right? And I'll be like, all right, I got hurt mountain biking, right? Or whatever it is. And they'll get over it. It's fine, or just hang out with a bunch of disabled people, because then we just always talk about how we got hurt. Like, everybody's story comes out when you're like... we're all learning. That's how I feel. If you have someone in your community, you can also just do a quick search. Like, I don't have to be your guide to everything. It's like, yeah, we have the Internet. You don't have to use it for just Instagram and Facebook. There's other uses for it.

Me: Even though Joe and Pierre said that they'd prefer people don't ask them about their disability, it's important that there's still an open line of communication between people with disabilities and able bodied people. People with disabilities want to get to know you. They want you to ask questions, and they want to interact with you. What they don't want is for the first interaction to be someone asking about their disability in an insensitive way. However, when it comes to kids, the situation can change. Kids are notorious for asking blunt questions that can be rude or embarrassing. But as Joe and Pierre will talk about in a minute, it's important that we let kids interact and talk to people with disabilities instead of reprimanding them for asking questions that could be uncomfortable. I talked to Anthony Swentosky about educating kids on disability in schools.

Me: Hello, how are you?

Anthony Swentosky: All good. All good.

Me: So what do you do?

Anthony Swentosky: My title is executive director of educational services. That's a long way of saying... I work a lot with our principals, instructional coaches, district leadership, as well as teachers around. Really all when you think of education, it's all things education. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, social, emotional learning. Do a lot of

work with early childcare and education. So systems level work with improving education. I feel like students are... the majority of students are open to this conversation, even at young ages. Or maybe we underestimate what a second grader can talk about. I think we do... what a third grader can talk about. This isn't a conversation that has to wait until you're a junior in high school to start talking about this.

Me: Joe agreed with Anthony that kids are open to conversations with people with disabilities and shouldn't be discouraged from interacting with them.

Joe Stone: Often parents will pull their kids away, no, no, no don't... No, that's a great moment for a young person to be able to interact with a person with disability and not feel like they're doing something wrong. So when you pull them away, say, don't ask them any questions. You're teaching them that it's not okay to ask people with disabilities things. And a lot of times it will have nothing to do with disability. The little kid will just want to know how cool... They want to make a comment on how cool my wheels are. They just think the tires are cool or something, or they... got a cool dog next to me or whatever. Often it has nothing to do with the disability.

Me: Pierre also had a similar message.

Pierre Bergman: Kids see me in a wheelchair, they think I just broke my leg, right? They don't assume, like, oh, he's always in a wheelchair. They just assume like, oh, he's in a wheelchair for a little bit. Cool wheelchair.

Joe Stone: But that interaction is teaching the child either a good thing or a bad thing. If you pull them away, it's teaching them, Whoa. It's not cool to talk to people that use wheelchairs or have something different going on, but if you allow them, then you're teaching them that it's totally okay to interact with somebody who's different.

Pierre Bergman: I think adults, they should be a little more aware, like, hey, I don't choose to be in a wheelchair because it's cool. I have no choice. So that's just, like, kind of the differentiator. And then, yeah, in the middle is like teens, where you just feel like if you're having a bad day. Yeah, you can get mad at them. If you're having a good day, you can explain to them there's inbetweens.

Me: There's a few things that I've learned through the course of my interviews on language. The first one is that education is so important. As Mike says,

Mike Longo: I do think there's still a lot of education that needs to be done. Like even me. Yesterday I use the term handicapped, and Claire told me that that's not acceptable anymore, and I had no idea. So I do think there's still a lot of education that can happen.

Me: I remember in elementary school, a group of people came into my classroom and explained to us why the R word was inappropriate to say. And I remember that they had a pledge that you could sign stating that you would never use the R word. But I feel like those pledges didn't change people's behavior. I asked six of my peers at school if they had ever had an experience like mine and most of them had. I then asked them if they felt like it had made a difference.

Student 1: I feel like it was like the same people all signed it, but then everyone just said it anyways.

Student 2: It was the same. Actually, people used it more.

Student 3: I didn't really hear very many people say it that often. I don't know if that was due to the pledge or anything.

Me: I then asked them, how often do you hear the R word or do you still hear the R word being used?

Student 4: I wouldn't say frequently, but somewhat often.

Student 5: Not often.

Student 6: Once in a while, but usually it's like shut down pretty quick.

Me: I found everyone's answers to be very interesting, and what I've learned is that your vocab definitely depends on the people you hang out with. Conversations are a big way to spread awareness to important topics, such as how our language affects people who have disabilities.

Joe Stone: I think talking about it is great. Not being afraid to talk about disability is great, and with that, that means getting people with disabilities and on the conversation. So if we really want to see things change, it's getting people with disabilities there talking and sharing their experiences and what they know and then working off of that. Because people with disabilities are going to be the ones that are going to be the experts in most disability related issues. Now, I'm not saying every person with a disability is an expert on all things disability, so it's finding the right person right to be

able to talk about whatever subject it is that you're trying to go over. But including people with disabilities in those conversations, I mean, a lot of awareness happens just through everyday conversation. So not being afraid to start a conversation or getting to know someone with a disability.

Me: And lastly, we should hold people accountable for their actions and or words. A classmate of mine, Kai McClennen, shared a good point when it comes to people using our word or other inappropriate words.

Kai McClennen: It seems like those types of things can only do so much, like an adult telling you not to say it. I think it has to come from peers. So the first step is of course not to say it yourself but then also if you hear someone saying it I think just call them out and be like, hey, that's not okay. And I think coming from a peer or a friend is much more impactful and will probably cause much more change than hearing.. just say don't say it from a teacher or just a random person coming into school. So yeah, I think emphasizing and encouraging that just calling people out if they say it from a friend to friend or peer to peer level.

Me: Sean Hannafin, one of the Moose hockey players, also had a good point on the topic of holding people accountable for their words or actions.

Sean Hannafin: If somebody says it, hopefully somebody confronts them on it and that's like anything if somebody's doing something in public, that's not okay. I think somebody needs to confront that person and make sure that they know that it's not alright. Not saying take violent action but maybe reprimand them a little bit say, hey, you have no idea who's around you. Maybe watch your mouth or watch your tone a little bit. It's just not okay.

Me: In conclusion, there seems to be more conversations happening nowadays and hopefully these conversations will bring awareness to some of the issues we see with our vocabulary and how we can change our language and be more accepting of others. I want to thank, in order of appearance, Mike Longo, Drew Akins, Mari Allan Hanna, Joe Stone, John Zendler, Pierre Bergman, Anthony Swentosky. My peers at school Beatrix, Bryn, Hayes, Avery, Nico and Isabel, Kai McClennen, and of course, Moose hockey player Sean Hannafin. Thank you for listening to this episode and next time we'll be talking about inspiration porn.