

Booklet on combating hate speech

People with
neuro-cognitive
disabilities

Project implemented by



"Language and culture are indivisible, our language is our culture and how we use it reflects on our culture."

Bronislaw Malinowski, anthropologist





Language and terminology

Did you know that...

- until the beginning of the 20th century, a person who had **epileptic seizures** was considered, in the view of the majority, to be **possessed by evil spirits**?
- until the beginning of the 19th century, a person with mental health problems was **labeled as a lunatic** because the Moon was considered to be responsible for that specific behavior?
- depression was called **melancholy** in the 19th century? It was mainly attributed to women, and in most cases people with **depression** were locked up for long periods or even for life in special centers, marginalized from society.
- what we now call a person with **Down syndrome** was referred to as a **Mongoloid** until the second half of the 19th century, due to the similarities in facial features with people of East Asian origin?



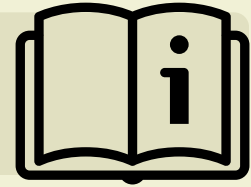
- the term **retarded** was first used in 1895? Although today it is considered to be a derogatory term, it wasn't so at the beginning. It has its origin in Latin, *retardo/retardare*, which means to slow down, *to delay* and was chosen to replace the terms previously used to describe a person with an intellectual disability (feeble-minded and idiot)[1].
- the first mention of the word **handicap** is found in England in 1751 and was, in fact, a sports term: an advantage or disadvantage that is offered or imposed on a competitor to equalize the chances of victory of the participants? It was not until 1915 that we saw the first record of its use in relation to a disabled person, referring to physically disabled people[2].

Initially, none of the above terms had negative connotations. Over time, by association, they became offensive words, widely used, and English language dictionaries mention (also) the pejorative, offensive meaning.

Many times we use these words without realizing it, jokingly or to describe a person or behavior. These are called **language automatisms**.

They need to be recognized and corrected.

Expression guide



You are retarded/handicapped.

The phrase is often used as a result of language automatisms, especially in a relaxed context or as a joke.

Please note! Using this phrase perpetuates the idea that a person with a disability is inferior to those which are not diagnosed with a disability. Therefore, **referring to someone as retarded or handicapped is unacceptable.** Even between friends, such terms should not be used pejoratively. The phrase may be painful for someone in our entourage about whom we don't know has a disability or someone close to us with a disability who has not spoken about it publicly.

Can I use the phrase jokingly if I have a disability myself or a person close to me has a disability?

You cannot. Although some people use it as self-deprecation, the phrase can be offensive or hurtful for other disabled people or their loved ones.



Autistic

When referring to a person diagnosed with autism, opinions vary: some people diagnosed with autism prefer the term *autistic person* while others object to the use of the term as an adjective, preferring the phrase *a person with autism*.

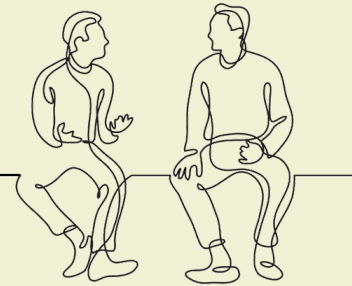
Always ask the person how they prefer to be referred to.

Please note! Referring to someone as having autism/autism spectrum disorder will only be done if the information is relevant and only if we know that the person has been formally diagnosed with autism. **Using the term in a pejorative sense is not allowed.** Here are some examples to avoid:

This is an autistic story. (meaning a story that makes no sense)

I can tell you that we cannot pretend to be autistic and that there is no discussion about an economic crisis.

Disabled person vs. “normal person”



According to the “*Cum scriem despre dizabilitate*”[3] guide, abnormality is a term used to describe something that deviates from the norms.

The term may be appropriate when it is used in a medical context, such as “abnormal curvature of the spine” or “an abnormal test result”. When used to describe a person, “abnormal” is commonly seen as **a pejorative term**.

The phrase “abnormal behaviour” reflects social-cultural standards and is open to interpretation.

Example: “*What can we do when we have in our school class disabled and normal students?*”

In contexts similar to the phrase above, the expression “disabled student” is synonymous with “abnormal student”, by antithesis with “normal student”.

Please note! Avoid using the phrase “normal person”, both on its own and in opposition to disabled person.

Suffering from autism, Down syndrome, some disability

The phrase carries with it the assumption that a person with a disability is struggling or has a reduced quality of life. **Not all disabled people suffer as a result of their medical impairments or particularities.**

Throughout time, disability has been seen only in terms of the person's inability to do certain things in the same way or at the same pace as most of those around them. This is the medical model of disability, widely mirrored by society until the early 21st century.



Suffering from autism, Down syndrome, some disability

For the past 20 years, the disability community has insisted on using **the social model of disability** as a person-centred rather than diagnosis-centred approach.



Handicap or disability?



Handicap is defined as a sensory, motor, mental or any other impairment of a person . The term emphasises the medical condition and limitations. Over time, it has been associated, in the collective mind, with what a person cannot do.

That is why, in recent years, communities of people with disabilities insist on using the term **disability** instead of the word handicap. Changes to this effect have also been made in most of the international or national legislation of the various countries.



Deconstruire de mituri

Myth: Autistic people cannot hear, this is why they do not respond.

Example: I think these people are autistic; they do not see and do not hear what is visible to all in good faith.

Fact: Autism does not affect a person's ability to hear. A person with autism spectrum disorder may respond more slowly or not at all in certain contexts, depending on their own sensory and cognitive processing.



Myth:

A person with autism does not have general knowledge and cannot learn things.

Example: *Political autism has become a paradigm on the political scene. A quarter of the Romanian political class displays ignorance, incompetence and lack of professionalism.*

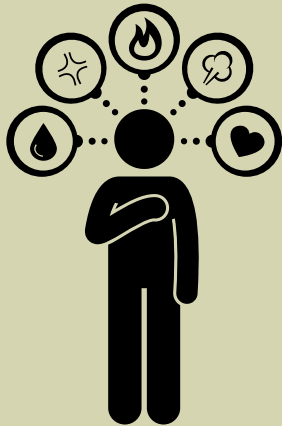
Fact:

The autism spectrum is very broad and can be associated with mild, moderate or severe cognitive impairment. However, using therapeutic approaches and appropriate teaching methods, a person with autism can learn differently, just like each of us, excelling or not in various areas.



Myth: People with disabilities do not have a personality of their own, they do not have preferences and pleasures.

Fact: Depending on the type of disability, different images of helplessness have been projected onto this category of people. Labels like: „the other“, „the one who is different“, carry with them not only the real differences given by the diagnosis, but also our own projections. Paradoxically, in an attempt to make it easier for us to live together with people with disabilities, we simplify, equalise, minimise where greater doses of empathy are required of us, extra efforts to find effective ways of communicating or infinite amounts of patience in the face of behaviour we do not understand.



For people with neuro-cognitive impairment, the most common preconception is that they have no feelings, no preferences, no complex inner life. That everything about their emotions is simple, superficial or (almost) non-existent. In reality, however, some of the diagnoses associate language impairments, difficulties in expressing their own feelings or in decoding the nonverbal language of the interlocutor. What is, in fact, a difficulty of expression, is wrongly labelled as a lack of personality or feelings.

Apraxia



Learn more!

Apraxia is a neurological condition characterised by poor brain control over the body. It is most often found in people with autism. It is manifested through a person's inability to say the words they think or make the body movements they want to make[4].

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the concept that people experience and interact with the world around them in different ways; there is no "right" way to think about the world, learn and behave, and differences are not seen as deficiencies.

The word emphasises social inclusion and acceptance of the fact that autism spectrum disorder, as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities, are neurological conditions (a unique and particular way of being), not diseases that can be cured.

The neurodiversity movement emerged in the 1990s with the goal of increasing acceptance and inclusion of all people while embracing neurological differences.[5]

Read the book Neurotribes [6], by Steve Silberman

Learn more!

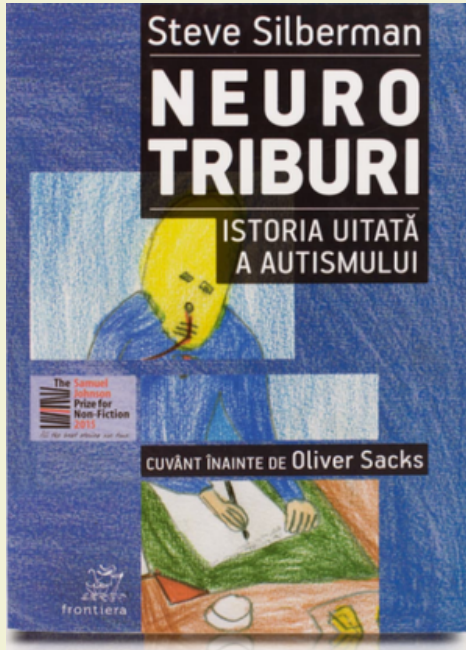


Photo source: screenshot, editurafrontiera.ro

Fortunately, with the disability rights movements that began in the second half of the 20th century, the inner voice of people with disabilities became increasingly heard.

When the social model of disability is applied and the necessary adaptations implemented, the world is enriched with new inner voices brought to light, the voices of people with disabilities.

Learn more about the artists with disabilities



- Literature:** Lateef McLeod, <https://abilitymagazine.com/lateef-mcleod/>
- Film:** Tedy Necula, film producer, <https://tedynecula.com/>
Fion Nathan, film producer and musician, www.fionnathan.com

Photography: David Stescu, <https://david.stescu.ro/>

Dance: Aby Watson, www.abywatson.co.uk

Theatre & Performance: *If These Spasms Could Speak*. Solo performance based on a collection of funny, sad or surprising incidents about disability
<https://adiarts.ie/artists/showcasing/if-these-spasms-could-speak/>

We Are Not Monsters. Performance about the marginalisation and inclusion of people with disabilities in society
www.disabilityartsinternational.org/resources/commission-we-are-not-monsters



Myth: People with ~~disabilities~~ are very friendly.

Fact: Yes, it is true. Many people are friendly when they are in a good mood, when they have slept well, when they are on vacation, when they have received a pleasant surprise, when it is sunny outside or, on the contrary, when it is raining quietly, when something they worked hard turned out well, when someone smiled at them earlier, when they are in love, when they made love, when...



By the way:



Myth:

People with neurocognitive disabilities cannot fall in love or have sexual relations.

Fact:

This is perhaps the best preserved myth of civilization. But history has shown us that every human can fall in love and this is likely to happen, especially before exams, according to some algorithms of human nature still unidentified by scientists, but whose sole purpose is to keep the young student from studying and to drive parents and teachers to despair.



Find out more:

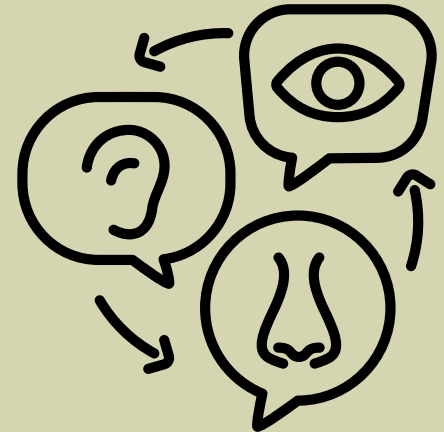


Myth: People with intellectual disabilities cannot understand art.

Fact: Can you read what is written here? *Hvem som helst kan forstå noe av kunsten hvis den blir forklart ved hjelp av riktig metode.*

If you knew Norwegian you would understand that the phrase above says *Anyone can understand something from art if it is explained to them using the appropriate method.*

Art can also become accessible to people with disabilities, as long as we use the right communication channel. Each of us has a preferred way of learning and experiencing the environment: through words, sounds, touch, smell etc. When given the appropriate methods to experience things, taking into consideration their abilities and the principle of neurodiversity, art can become accessible to anyone, regardless of diagnosis.



Footnotes:

[1] Mental Help, *History of Stigmatizing Names for Intellectual Disabilities Continued*, MentalHelp.net

[2] Merriam Webster dictionary, *handicapped*, merriam-webster.com

[3] Superoi printre noi, *Cum scriem despre dizabilitate? Ghid pentru jurnaliști*, translated title:: How do we write about disability? Guide for Journalists, supereroiprintrenoi.ro

[4] Special Books by Special Kids, *Living with Speech Apraxia*, youtube.com

[5] Nicole Baumer, MD, MeD and Julia Frueh, MD, *What is neurodiversity?*, health.harvard.edu

[6] Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes*, editurafrontiera.ro





Additional Resources

Other cool things to see:

- **Online course, The Social Context of Mental Health and Illness**, University of Toronto, through Coursera, [coursera.org](https://www.coursera.org)
- ***Crip Camp*** (on Netflix), documentary about the beginnings of disability rights in the 60s and their influence on international rights today, [netflix.com](https://www.netflix.com)
- **Our night at Bounce - the club night for people with intellectual disabilities!**, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)
- **Intelligent lives**, documentary about the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and the preconceptions related to them, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)
- ***Mâini cuminiți. Copilul meu autist.*** translated title: Gentle hands. My autistic child, Autor Ana Dragu
- **Things People With Down's Syndrome Are Tired of Hearing Myths about Down syndrome debunked by people with Down syndrome**, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)
- **Special Books by Special Kids**, the most beautiful video interviews with disabled and neurodiverse people, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)



About the author: **Ruxandra Mateescu**, <https://supereroiprintrenoi.ro/author/ruxandra/>
A mother. A mother of a child with disabilities. Specialist in cultural accessibility and social inclusion. Lifelong supporter of people with special needs. Officially "Disability & Cultural Rights Defender".



Cover Illustrator: **Bianca Jelezniac**, @palette_box



More about the project **Non-discrimination, beyond words**:
www.crj.ro/en/antidiscriminare/nediscriminarea-dincolo-de-cuvinte/

This material was produced with the financial support of the Active Citizens Fund Romania, programme funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA Grants 2014-2021. The content does not necessarily reflect the official position of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021; for more information visit www.eeagrants.org.

© **Centre for Legal Resources, Bucharest, June 2022** - www.crj.ro