

# 9 Things NOT to Say to People With Disabilities

By Stacy Straczynski

**How do you go to the bathroom? What's wrong with you? Can you still have children? You don't look so bad.**

**What should you NOT say to people with disabilities? Get lessons from the experts.**

"It is not so much about etiquette. ... Words that speak to a person's medical condition are not appropriate, and it is important to put the person first: a person with a disability versus a diabetic, quadriplegic, et cetera," says Deborah Dagit, a disabilities expert and retired Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer of [Merck & Co.](#) (No. 12 in the [DiversityInc Top 50](#)), who was born with [Osteogenesis imperfecta](#) (brittle bone disease), is four feet tall and uses a wheelchair at work to enhance her mobility.

When all else fails, it's OK to ask respectfully, says Dagit, who prefers to be called a "little person." "I am proud to be associated with this community, but others who are diminutive may think this sounds too much like they are part of a daycare center," she explains. "I am also not comfortable with being described as wheelchair-bound or confined: My wheelchair and motorized scooter are enabling tools in my life and I am neither tied into them nor unhappy about using them to be safer and more comfortable."

## You Said WHAT?!

Culturally insensitive terms include "handicapped," "retarded" and "slow," and even "compliments" such as "but you look so good."

Executives from the [National Organization on Disability](#) say the best advice is to use common sense: "If you wouldn't say it to your boss, you shouldn't say it to a person with a disability."

We've compiled a list of real-life conversations that happened in the workplace to serve as examples of what not to say to people with visible and/or invisible disabilities.

**1 "How do you go to the bathroom?"**  
"Yes, this still gets asked," says Will Roberts, Program Manager at NOD, who uses a wheelchair. "Unfortunately, potty talk doesn't end in elementary school. Anything to do with bodily functions is out of line, just as it would be with any other co-worker."

**2 "I don't even think of you as a person with a disability."**  
Meg O'Connell, former Vice President of Corporate Programs at NOD, gets this

comment a lot when she discloses that she has epilepsy. This is the equivalent of saying, "I don't think of you as a Black person, or Asian, or Hispanic, or gay, or a woman," says O'Connell. "This is a comment that really doesn't add value."

O'Connell advises that when someone is disclosing a disability, the best response is to ask if the person needs anything or to thank them for disclosing such personal information.



## 9 Things NOT to Say to People With Disabilities continued

**3** **“Can you still have children?”**  
This is not an appropriate question to ask any co-worker. The National Organization on Disability says you can simply ask as you would any other co-worker, “Are you married?” or, “Do you have children?”

**4** **“If the organization’s willing to hire someone who looks like you, it’s more caring than I thought.”**  
“Shortly after being hired for a visible leadership role in my company, I had several colleagues tell me this with tears in their eyes. What do you say to a comment like that?” asks Dagit. “‘Thank you’?”

**5** **“Tell me what he/she might want/need?”** “My father-in-law had Parkinson’s disease, and this would happen a lot when we would be out to dinner: The waiter or waitress would invariably ask, ‘Do you know what he wants?’ We would usually just say, ‘Why don’t you ask him?’” says O’Connell.  
Always speak directly to the person with

a disability, and if there is something the person needs, he/she will let you know, O’Connell says.

**6** **“Oh, I’m so sorry,” or, “It must be bad for you.”** “Most people with disabilities have learned to live very well with their disability and do not need pity or sympathy,” says NOD Director of Research and Public Funding Kate Brady. “Offering your sympathy on what you believe to be a struggle or difficult for a person with a disability may not be—it may just be how they get things done.”

**7** **“When will you get better and not have to use a wheelchair/cane, take medication, et cetera?”** People tend to associate orthopedic equipment, tools and treatments as a limiting stigma of a person’s disability rather than a method of well-being and productivity. After one bad fall and subsequent medical leave, Dagit made the choice to start using a wheelchair or motorized scooter at work.  
“On many occasions people expressed

concern about my health and wondered when I would get better,” she says. “They associated using a wheelchair with not recovering, although I explained many times I am in excellent health and feeling better than I did before I got hurt—it helps me better manage my energy and prevent injuries.”

**8** **“Wow, you can drive!” or, “How did you do that?”** Expressing amazement and congratulations for achieving everyday tasks is not appropriate, explains Roberts. “People with disabilities have the same wants and needs as anyone else, and if they can, they will find a way to get what they need and are uncomfortable with praise,” he says.

**9** **“What, are you retarded?”** Intellectual insults can be common workplace banter. However, using a slur to comment on someone’s abilities is offensive, not to mention insensitive, as one in five people have a disability. Think before you speak.



### Pay It Forward: Inclusion at Work and Home

Additionally, Dagit notes that employees with children should pay their diversity training forward at home. “I usually choose to work from home on Take Your Child to Work Day. ... It is exponentially more challenging when a colleague’s child makes an awkward comment and the parent reacts with horror,” she says.

Parents should let children ask questions about people who are different, but they should do so quietly—and they should never point or stare for a prolonged period. “The worst possible reaction is to punish the child,” Dagit says, “as they then associate people who are different with something bad that they cannot talk about.”

**NEXT  
MONTH**

## National American Indian Heritage Month