



Awareness Through Networking

This tip sheet will give you advice on how to network, or connect with new people, so that you can teach them about and make them more comfortable with your disability. The more people know about disabilities as a whole, the more disability awareness is spread. As a result, less people will use offensive language when talking about disability.

Making new friends is one way to spread disability awareness. It may seem overwhelming now, but it's not that hard! It's all about stepping outside of your comfort zone and being a little outgoing. This may seem scary too, but start just by introducing yourself and/ or saying "hi" to a new person everyday; by the end of the week, seven people will know who you are, or at least know of you, and you would've possibly made seven new friends. If you talk to them a little more each day, there's a definite possibility you will become friends with at least one of them. Remember this is just one way to make new friends, there are plenty of other ways like joining clubs or during after- school activities! You may be thinking, well, how do I teach them about my disability?

Well I will give you an example. One day at school, while I was at my locker, a group of girls walked by me. As they passed, I heard one of them say, "Oh look, there goes the cripple." It took a while for me to process what I had just overheard, but when I did, I was incredibly shocked and hurt. Worst of all, I was too scared and shy to say anything directly to the girl. Instead I spent a good number of days after this happened moping around, being mad at myself for not speaking up in the first place, and complaining to my friends about how annoyed I was by the whole thing. My friends offered to talk to her multiple times, and each time I asked them not to because it wasn't their battle to fight. It was my battle, and once I realized that, I realized I had to do something about it.

The problem was I had no idea how to even approach the situation, until one of my friends told me to tell her that using inappropriate language when referring to a person's disability wasn't okay. That's when it clicked-- I needed to teach her about my disability and disability awareness in general. The next day I went up to her, her friends, and few other people and told them that I found the word "cripple" offensive and asked them not to use it. They said they were sorry and started asking questions about my disability, all of which I answered happily.



To this day, I consider those people a large part of my support network. They now have a better understanding of what words are okay to use when talking about disability and pass that understanding on to other people they know. As for me, I try to talk to and be friends with as many people as possible and make sure that they know what I consider to be appropriate language. I also emphasize that a person with a disability is just a person. Hopefully those people are educating other people as well! It's kind of cool to think that just by speaking up and talking to one person, one hundred people could end up gaining more knowledge.

If you don't feel comfortable talking about your disability right away, that's okay; in fact, it could be a good thing because you're not shoving a lot of information in people's faces. People are naturally curious, so your new friend, or friends, may ask you questions about your disability. If not, based on experience, I can almost guarantee that it will come up in a conversation and your friend, or friends, will learn about your disability that way.

Regardless of how you do it, it's important to let people know what you do and don't feel comfortable with. For example, I don't like people touching or pushing my chair without asking first. Also, make sure to let them know what words I consider to be inappropriate. Just by doing things like this, you are spreading disability awareness!

For more information on disability awareness you can visit:

- <http://www.themoreyouknow.com/disability-awareness>
- <http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/General/Disability-awareness.html>