

Why I Prefer to be "Handicapped"

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Being handicapped is so cool. You get all the best parking places (if you've had the time to do the paperwork). You also have a built-in filter for finding out quickly if someone's a jerk or not. If they treat you like garbage and yell at you resentfully for taking too long in the checkout line, you immediately know who you're dealing with without having to play a lot of games.

Seriously folks, of course I'd prefer to be able-bodied rather than being handicapped. But, now that I have your attention, please take a moment to think about the labels we use. If I have a choice between being labeled *disabled* versus *handicapped*, I prefer "handicapped." If you know the definitions and derivations of the two words (below), and agree with research that describes how language frames our ideas and perceptions, then perhaps you'll understand why this matters.

Being regarded as "disabled" means that you lack something -- that you are set apart from ability (i.e., not able to do things). Not so, and I don't like the label. Being handicapped means you are burdened, you have an encumbrance, but this does not mean you are unable to achieve, are unfit, or unable to be a worthy competitor in the game of life. For example, I may not be able to help you work in your garden, but if there's some quick trick or tip you want to know for how to use your computer, or you need troubleshooting help with your audio system, there's a good chance I'm your man, er...woman, uh...physically handicapped, yet mentally-able computer nerd. The sense of a handicap, i.e. to equalize one's chances for success based on conscious decisions, is a lot more positive than the label "disabled" implies.

Our greatest contemporary exemplar is Steven Hawking. He rides around in a wheelchair, can't speak without computer-aided software, yet out-thinks most everyone on the planet. (A) handicapped or (B) disabled? I choose (A).



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handicap

—noun

1. a race or other contest in which certain disadvantages or advantages of weight, distance, time, etc., are placed upon competitors to equalize their chances of winning.
2. the disadvantage or advantage itself.
3. any disadvantage that makes success more difficult: The main handicap of our business is lack of capital.
4. a physical or mental disability making participation in certain of the usual activities of daily living more difficult.

–verb (used with object)

1. to place at a disadvantage; disable or burden: He was handicapped by his injured ankle.
2. to subject to a disadvantageous handicap, as a competitor of recognized superiority.
3. to assign handicaps to (competitors).

Etymology of "handicap":

c.1653, from hand in cap, a game whereby two bettors would engage a neutral umpire to determine the odds in an unequal contest. The bettors would put their hands holding forfeit money into a hat or cap. The umpire would announce the odds and the bettors would withdraw their hands -- hands full meaning that they accepted the odds and the bet was on, hands empty meaning they did not accept the bet and were willing to forfeit the money. If one forfeited, then the money went to the other. If both agreed on either forfeiting or going ahead with the wager, then the umpire kept the money as payment. The custom, though not the name, is attested from 14c.

Reference to horse racing is 1754 (Handy-Cap Match), where the umpire decrees the superior horse should carry extra weight as a "handicap;" this led to sense of "encumbrance, disability" first recorded 1890. The verb sense of "equalize chances of competitors" is first recorded 1852, but is implied in the horse-race sense. Meaning "put at a disadvantage" is 1864. The main modern sense, "disability," is the last to develop; handicapped (adj.) is 1915.

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disability

1. lack of adequate power, strength, or physical or mental ability; incapacity.
2. a physical or mental handicap, esp. one that prevents a person from living a full, normal life or from holding a gainful job.
3. anything that disables or puts one at a disadvantage: His mere six-foot height will be a disability in professional basketball.
4. the state or condition of being disabled.
5. legal incapacity; legal disqualification.

definition of prefix "dis-":

dis⁻¹

a Latin prefix meaning "apart," "asunder," "away," "utterly," or having a privative, negative, or reversing force (see de-, un-2); used freely, esp. with these latter senses, as an English formative: disability; disaffirm; disbar; disbelief; discontent; dishearten; dislike; disown. Also, di-

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