

# Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me

By Barry O'Donovan



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The phrase "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is a common response when someone has said something hurtful. In reality, bones heal, but words, policies and insensitive behaviours can create ongoing negative consequences and exclusion. Simply changing our words and perspective can build inclusivity. Our Disability and Wellbeing Network, DaWN, receives many emails from colleagues on the receiving end of unfair or insensitive actions who fear challenging these actions. DaWN regularly meets with our HR Business Partners to find a confidential way to address such issues.

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The word "access" usually refers to physical items such as lifts, toilets and ramps. When I think of "access" I prefer to focus on touching colleagues' hearts and minds, building dialogue, creating awareness and challenging barriers. DaWN shares lived experience and the emotional impact of some work practices. This has touched colleagues' hearts and shifted mindsets, allowing a joint compassionate approach to remove barriers.

**How far have we come?** In 1676 the new [Bethlem mental asylum](#) opened in London. The “Palace of Lunatics” was a curiosity attraction and it was noted “the great quantity of persons that come daily to see the Lunaticks”. Difficult patients got diagnosed as “stark Bedlam mad”. Thankfully, mental health attitudes have come far. The new Mental Health awareness training, currently being piloted with DaWN by the People Directorate, should foster more inclusive conversations. This NHS Digital [guide](#) on how to communicate about disability and difference helps leave [ableism](#) words, like [bedlam](#), [lunatic](#), [stark raving mad](#), in the past.

In terms of digital access and reasonable adjustments, our Corporate IT and Smarter Working teams have worked with DaWN to develop new processes. They’ve created a central team for reasonable adjustments and have embedded user-based testing of assistive technology into their process. Office 365 software now has in-built accessibility tools and staying on the latest version helps as more accessibility is added.

Reflecting on physical access to our offices, DaWN and our Commercial team co-produced an amazing set of venue accessibility criteria for our organisation. Hopefully this will make a real difference to colleagues. Moving to home working during COVID-19 and allowing adapted/altered working hours, which previously had been the most common types of adjustment requests, are now easier if not standard practice.

**How far have we to go?** I admire colleagues with long-term conditions and the insight lived experience brings. Inventing work-arounds for your impairment, speaking up and compiling evidence, maybe up to tribunal level to access state support. Having to have emotional resilience to withstand stigma, intrusive questioning and now dealing with COVID-19. Colleagues with a comorbidity condition (disability) are at greatest risk and often feeling anxious and isolated.

Compassionate support systems do make a difference. I had a government health assessment at 5pm on a Friday, involving a long drive. Due to a stress-related condition and fatigue, I asked to change this appointment but my request was refused and my application for support was rejected. Despite many calls and attempts at reasoning, only a legal letter helped get my application re-instated and an alternative assessment time agreed. With this in mind, perhaps could we consider using existing evidence for deciding on reasonable adjustments and make fewer referrals to Occupational Health at work?

Planning is another key skill if you have a disability: your travel route, days out and holidays. The more detail the better, otherwise you risk pain, distress, accidents and feelings of being deflated.

The label of “disabled” and “disability”, meaning less able, is negative. The disabled symbol reinforces a lack of ability. The symbol used to depict disabled or disability is a wheelchair, yet only 8% of disabled people are wheelchair users. Where are the messages of ability? This stigma means many people with long-term conditions don’t use this label, despite meeting the legal definition. Some keep their disability a secret out of fear (DaWN membership is confidential). Those of us who “out ourselves” fear being treated differently. Interviews pose a dilemma: should you be open about your disability and reduce a disadvantage with an adjustment, or say nothing to avoid prejudice and doubt? I hope this fear goes away but until then DaWN provides a safe space, valuing lived experience, supporting colleagues, resolving issues and promoting inclusion.

A big cheer to our organisation for adopting the Workplace Disability Equality Standard. This should enable us to better understand and plan for our colleagues with disabilities. In my mind, “Positive Action” a recommendation of the Equality Act of 2010 ([link to guide](#)) would be a great next step, to boost applications for all underrepresented groups. I am not sure how many colleagues are aware of “positive action” so I want to share how this has worked successfully for apprenticeships across many industries. This is [a great research paper](#) on how more female, LGBT+, disabled and BAME apprentices were recruited. If our organisation adopted similar practices, then it would create a more diverse and inclusion pool of candidates and routes into work for underrepresented and/or marginalised groups. This [guide](#) focuses on supporting people with disabilities as there can be additional support needs. It would be great to have a wider discussion on positive action but perhaps, that is for another day.

Please stay safe at this uncertain time and let’s enable (not disable) each other.