



## How does it feel to be blind? (and how do we talk about this?)

I often ask you to tell me about yourselves so I can imagine what it's like for you, listening to this.

I know what it's like for *me*. I sit here and talk into my microphone and do my best to make my episodes interesting, insightful, instructive, engaging and entertaining.

Then I often wonder about my listeners, dotted around in different parts of the world.

Where are you, and what are you doing while you listen to my words? What's your context?

What's your experience?

Sometimes people write to me and they tell me.

Recently I got some emails from a listener called Hafid and they inspired me to make the episode that you're listening to now.

## Emails from Hafid

Hafid is a regular listener to this podcast. He is French with Algerian parents. His first email was a response to an old episode from the LEP archives - episode 287 "Vocab Battle with Amber & Paul".

Amongst other things, in his email Hafid mentioned this:

*I'm not able to leave comments on your website because i'm blind and the accessibility software i'm using does not allow me to do everything i want to do.*

**and**

*Thanks a lot for your podcast, it helps me in many ways in my life and i'm very happy to listen to it.*

**I replied**

*Hi Hafid,*

*Thanks for the email and for the bits of feedback in response to episode 287.*

*I'm very glad that you enjoy the episodes and that they help you in various ways. Also, it's impressive that you are able to find the episodes and listen to them despite your visual impairment. I really hope you enjoy listening to the other episodes I have made.*

*All the best,  
Luke*

## Accessibility Software

Hafid mentioned his accessibility software. I had an *idea* of what this could be - probably software which allowed him to use a computer, but I wasn't sure.

I asked ChatGPT, who I am considering calling "Chad" as a nickname. I'm not sure about it. Anyway, here's what Chad told me.

Accessibility software for blind people, often referred to as assistive technology, is designed to help individuals with visual impairments navigate and interact with computers, smartphones, and other digital devices. These tools are essential for promoting digital inclusivity and ensuring that blind or visually impaired individuals can access and use technology effectively.

## Using a computer with impaired vision

Think for a moment about what it must be like to use the internet without being able to see the screen properly. Close your eyes and try to do anything on your computer or phone.

Imagine being blind and trying to find my podcast, listen to specific episodes and then email me your comments.

I don't know how difficult that is for Hafid - but I was impressed that the technology makes it possible and that there are people out

there who have a different experience and who come to my work in a different way.

I expect that if you are visually impaired, podcasts must be a fantastic thing to have available to you. Thank goodness for podcasts, right?

I remember once meeting a blind man when I worked at HMV in Liverpool, before podcasts existed.

**\*Luke describes meeting this man\***

The main point is that he had to use audiobooks and was very frustrated at the selection available, particularly that we had nothing by HP Lovecraft. I suggested Tolkein but he found it far too soft for him. He clearly had a ferocious intellect and really badly needed stimulation.

Anyway, thank goodness for the internet and the millions of podcasts and audiobooks which are available on it.

**Hafid then replied again**

*Hafid*

*To: You*

*Wed 01/11/2023 09:29*

*Hi Luke,*

*I hope everything is fine with you and your great family.*

*Don't worry, i'm not going to send you emails each and every day. I know you are very busy.*

*I would like to thank you ; it's very nice of you to reply to my mail  
About episode #287.*

*I heard many other episodes and enjoyed most of them, especially  
those featuring Amber and Paul.*

*I had an idea and i wanted to share it with you.*

*In 1985, i went to London and i spent 8 wonderful days with a  
british family. I can't remember if they lived in Rainham or  
Chatham.*

*The mother used to wake me up every morning and bring me to the  
kitchen for breakfast. The bedroom i was sleeping in was upstairs.  
She always asked me if i could manage. My english level was very  
bad (and still is) and all i found to respond was "i don't know".*

*As far as i'm aware, you have not done a podcast about people  
with disabilities yet.*

*It might be useful for people like me.*

*I hope i'm not disturbing you and i wish you success, good health  
and all the best*

*May the Force be with you :)*

*Hafid*

**Let's stop and consider what Hafid's host mother in London  
said.**

*"Can you manage?"* → what does this mean?

I suppose it means "Do you need help?"

"Are you able to manage - are you able to do what you are doing?  
Or do you need assistance?"

People don't always say exactly what they mean in explicit terms, and instead they say one simple question which has a lot of meaning wrapped up in it. In this case "Can you manage?"

What could Hafid have said in response?

- No, I can't manage. I need help.
- Yes, I can manage. I don't need help.
- Somewhere in between yes and no.

**No, I can't manage. I need help.**

Sorry, can you come and help me for a moment?

Do you mind giving me a bit of assistance?

Could you help me down the stairs?

Could you help me for a moment?

Could you just show me where the xxx is/are?

I'm just trying to find xxx.

Sorry to bother you.

Thanks a lot.

**Yes, I can manage. I don't need help.**

Yes, I can manage, thank you.

Hold on, I'm coming.

I'll be there in a moment.

Just bear with me for a moment, thanks.

I'm on my way.

Sorry, I'm just taking a bit of time.

Feel free to start without me.

I'll join you in a moment.

I'm just xxx-ing

### **Somewhere between yes and no**

Just a moment, I'm not quite ready.

Could you ask me again in a moment, sorry.

I'm coming, but I might be some time. I might be a while. I might be a few moments.

I'm just working something out here, sorry.

Is it necessary to say "sorry"? → yes, this is the UK. We say sorry all the time as a little softener. It's just a way to keep things nice and there is nothing undignified or weak about it.

**I replied to Hafid and asked him what kind of things I could talk about in an episode about disability.**

### **He wrote this**

*Well, you could teach us some vocab like "partially sighted", "blind", "wheelchair" and a lot more obviously.*

*You could also talk about screen readers, braille devices, OCR and TTS and so on.*

*You could talk about how people with disabilities are seen. For example, someone looks like he is angry, as a matter of fact, he is only trying to see what is in front of him.*

**This is a great idea for a podcast. Thank you Hafid.**

**This is a great idea for several reasons.**

### **1. Vocabulary**

First of all, there is a lot of English to be learned from this subject. A lot of vocabulary, as Hafid suggested, relating to this topic, but also knowing what is considered appropriate and inappropriate or respectful and disrespectful terminology.

### **2. A chance to understand something which can affect us all but which we don't always talk about**

I've always wondered what it must be like to be blind, but also what it must be like to live with other forms of disability.

To be honest, I have thought about these things more and more in recent years because several people in my family have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and I have seen the ways it can affect their lives in so many ways - in terms of physical motor control, but also in terms of the mental side - how it affects their identity.

**Wait, Luke. What is Parkinson's?**

I've moved away from talking about being blind, to talking about Parkinson's now, because I know several people who have been diagnosed with it and who are living with it at different stages of



development. It can be considered a disability because of the way the symptoms affect people.

### From the NHS website

Parkinson's disease is a condition in which parts of the brain become progressively damaged over many years.

### Symptoms of Parkinson's disease

include:

- involuntary shaking of particular parts of the body (tremor)
- slow movement
- stiff and inflexible muscles

A person with Parkinson's disease can also experience a wide range of other physical and psychological symptoms.

These include:

- depression and anxiety
- balance problems (this may increase the chances of a fall)
- loss of sense of smell (anosmia)
- problems sleeping (insomnia)
- memory problems
- difficulty eating

(loss of vision is not a symptom of Parkinson's as far as I know)

My point there is that I am interested in understanding what it is like to live with different kinds of disability and that disability comes in many forms.

Let's go back to the example of being blind.

## What is it like to be blind?

- What is it like to be visually impaired, or to be in a wheelchair, or to have another kind of disability? What about if you have a disability which isn't obvious?
- How do you manage tasks that other people don't think twice about, like just getting dressed and coming downstairs to join everyone for breakfast?
- How do other people treat you?
- How do you want to be treated?

### 3. This is an exercise in perspective

It makes me think of the old saying "Before you judge someone, walk a mile in their shoes" which is really about the importance of empathy.

Try to imagine what it must be like to be someone else and to live their experience. Surely this is a good exercise in being a humane, considerate and compassionate person, which I believe are important for being a good communicator and also a good member of the human race.

Understanding how it is for a disabled person can help us to understand how to behave and talk.

And anyone can be disabled. It can happen to anyone and there are many ways a person can be disabled.

Many people who do not have a disability now will have one in the future. Others will have a family member or a friend who will become disabled.

You could become disabled. In fact it is very likely that you will end up with some kind of disability, because as we get older our bodies change and you might find that you can't do the things you could do before, for example you might get mobility issues, visual impairments, hearing impairments or mental issues. We're all likely to experience some level of disability either directly ourselves or in a loved one.

If you become disabled in your lifetime, how do you want people to describe you?

If a family member or friend becomes disabled, how would you want him/her to be treated?

Disability affects everyone and Language is at the heart of this because the words we use have an impact.

## Here's the Plan

- 1. Read an article written by a blind person, explaining what it is really like to be blind.**

I wanted to hear from someone describing this in their own words. I found a really interesting article which was written in response to the question "What is it like to be blind?"

I'll read through the article, give my comments and explain some vocabulary.

2. **How to talk about disability. Terms which are considered appropriate and inappropriate when talking about disability these days.**
3. **Vocabulary - lists of various words relating to physical and mental disability, including objects, forms of disability, types of treatment, other related issues.**

I have absolutely loads of words here, so this vocabulary part might be in a second episode, or I might make it into a premium episode. We'll see how long this all takes.

---

## 1. Article: What does it feel like to be blind?

Click the link to read the article which I read in this episode 📌

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/12/what-does-it-feel-like-to-be-blind.html>

---

## 2. How to talk about disability

The following two paragraphs are from a guide on respectful disability language on the National Youth Leadership Network website - an organisation to promote leadership in young people. [https://www.aucd.org/docs/add/sa\\_summits/Language%20Doc.pdf](https://www.aucd.org/docs/add/sa_summits/Language%20Doc.pdf)

“The use of language and words describing people with disabilities has changed over time. It's important that people are aware of the

meaning behind the words they use when talking to, referring to, or working with the Disability Community.

Disrespectful language can make people feel excluded and can be a barrier to full participation.

Imagine living your whole life always having to explain why the words that people use are hurtful and offensive to you. People with disabilities want respect and acceptance. So learn respectful language and teach others."

## **A list of appropriate language and terms for referring to people with disabilities, and what language to avoid**

When referring to various kinds of disabilities, it's important to use respectful and inclusive language. Here's a list of appropriate words, terms, and usage for different types of disabilities:

### **1. \*\*Physical Disabilities\*\*:**

- Appropriate Terms: Use the specific name of the condition if known (e.g., cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy), or "person with a physical disability."
- Avoid: "Crippled," "deformed," or other derogatory terms.

### **2. \*\*Visual Impairments/Blindness\*\*:**

- Appropriate Terms: "Visually impaired," "blind," "person with a visual impairment," or "person who is blind."
- Avoid: "Sightless," "blind as a bat," or using "blind" in a derogatory manner.

3. **Hearing Impairments/Deafness**:

- Appropriate Terms: "Deaf," "hard of hearing," "person with a hearing impairment," or "person who is deaf."
- Avoid: "Hearing-impaired" (which some find stigmatizing), or using "deaf" in a derogatory way. "Are you deaf or what?" when someone doesn't understand something. Using "deaf" as an insult term synonymous with "stupid".

4. **Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**:

- Appropriate Terms: "Person with an intellectual disability," "person with a developmental disability," or use specific conditions if known (e.g., Down syndrome, autism).
- Avoid: Using "retarded" or other derogatory terms.

5. **Mental Health Disabilities**:

- Appropriate Terms: "Person with a mental health condition," "individual with a mental illness," or use specific diagnoses (e.g., depression, anxiety).
- Avoid: Stigmatizing language like "crazy," "insane," or "psycho."

6. **Neurodiversity**:

- Appropriate Terms: "Neurodiverse," "person with neurodivergence," or specify the condition (e.g., autism, ADHD).
- Avoid: Using "abnormal," "weird," or derogatory terms related to specific conditions.

7. **Mobility Disabilities**:

- Appropriate Terms: "Person with a mobility disability" or specify the condition if known (e.g., paraplegia).

- Avoid: Using "crippled," "confined to a wheelchair," or other derogatory language.

8. **\*\*Speech Disabilities\*\***:

- Appropriate Terms: "Person with a speech disability" or specify the condition (e.g., stuttering).
- Avoid: Ridiculing or mimicking speech differences.

9. **\*\*Learning Disabilities\*\***:

- Appropriate Terms: "Person with a learning disability" or specify the condition (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD).
- Avoid: Labeling individuals as "dumb" or "lazy."

10. **\*\*Chronic Illness and Invisible Disabilities\*\***:

- Appropriate Terms: "Person with a chronic illness," "person with an invisible disability," or specify the condition (e.g., fibromyalgia, Crohn's disease).
- Avoid: Questioning the legitimacy of invisible disabilities or using stigmatizing language.

11. **\*\*Wheelchair Users\*\***:

- Appropriate Terms: "Wheelchair user" or "person who uses a wheelchair."
- Avoid: "Confined to a wheelchair" or implying dependency.

12. **\*\*Sign Language and Communication\*\***:

- Appropriate Terms: "American Sign Language (ASL)," "Sign language interpreter," or "communication support" for non-verbal individuals.
- Avoid: Insensitive comments about sign language or alternative communication methods.

Remember that the preferences for language may vary among individuals, so it's a good practice to ask individuals with disabilities about their preferred terminology and respect their choices. The key is to use respectful and person-centered language that promotes dignity and inclusion.

---