# **Off the beat: A case against the ‘r-word’**

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 “That’s *retarded*.”

I look up, dumbfounded, with blurred gray eyes and an expression that conveys a silent suffering. The perpetrator — sometimes friend, sometimes foe — cackles, blissfully unaware of the slight’s impact.

Why does it disturb me so excessively, this stain on the English language that was formerly a respected clinical term? Perhaps it’s because it deters me from comfortably revealing the full identity of my favorite person on Earth: my younger brother, Joseph. He happens to fall into the category this word inhumanely singles out. He has Down syndrome.

Meanings of words evolve. “Retarded” is a slur now, and casual utilization of it is not clever. Justifications for its usage range from “It’s just a word” to “People with mental disabilities don’t understand the word, so it doesn’t matter if I say it.”

And that’s what petrifies me. Even the most educated of people are picking a term that insults those who are, in many cases, literally voiceless. Joseph, to illustrate, hears “retarded” and does not have the cognitive or linguistic capacity to defend himself. But his silence has a sound — one of profound grief. To use this word is to humiliate and hurt a community that is often powerless to protect itself.

When I heard that University Relations had confirmed Bill Maher as the fall commencement speaker, the world fell soundless around me. Somewhat overlooked in the case against his invitation was the quip he made in January 2001, on his show “Politically Incorrect,” about “retarded children.” But he went further than that, sinking so low as to compare them to dogs: animals that, while loveable, still bark, drool and get by on four legs.

Barbara Walters stood up for Maher on “The View,” stating he didn’t intend “it to be mean-spirited.” Whoopi Goldberg continued that “we, society, took the word ‘retarded’ and made it into something derogatory.” So, according to Whoopi, it’s fine that Maher said “retarded” because its negative connotation is merely a social construct — yet many of us are quick to speak out against offensive usage of the word “gay,” and rightfully so. Why, then, don’t as many of us grant “retarded” the same consideration?

People can defend Maher all day long for making that remark (“He’s a comedian”), but all I see is a cowardly, reckless man who used his voice to malign the voiceless and undervalued. His version of “comedy” attempts to insulate ignorant statements with a veneer of humor.

I do commend Maher for apologizing within the month — but he knew perfectly well what the word meant when he voiced it. His apology does little to rectify the tidal wave of damage these offhand comments cause. When this popular comedian spews out ignorance, impressionable people hear him and assume they should do the same, because it’s “funny.”

My brother has more emotional intelligence than anyone I know. While I can occasionally act selfishly in my refusal to make the hour long drive to visit my aunt in her nursing home, Joseph always looks forward to it. When I’m upset, I know Joseph doesn’t necessarily comprehend the reason behind my melancholy — but he’ll say my name soothingly and hug me until the pain evaporates into the vast universe of which I am only an irrelevant particle. Though Joseph may not fully grasp that I’m away from home to pursue a college education, or that my dad is away from home to go to work, his heart aches because he knows a family should stay together.

That’s why I don’t get it when even those who fight for different areas of social justice — be it gender equality, LGBT rights, issues surrounding race — choose to use an able-ist term in place of a more precise one. Why neglect the opportunity to employ more accurate vocabulary? I think you meant to call your professor “unreasonable,” not developmentally disabled.

Furthermore, even if you referred to someone with a bona fide mental impairment as “retarded,” you would be limiting the person to that one demeaning label. Yes, my brother faces obstacles, but everyone does in one way or another. Above all, he’s a beautiful person who cares deeply about his family. Why hide redemptive traits behind the pernicious mask of pejorative vocabulary?

To be clear, I hate the sin, not the sinner. Many of the people who use this term are lovely in other respects and don’t intend to inflict emotional damage upon those associated with the special-needs community. The impact, however, is detrimental regardless of the intent.

It’s 2015, not the mid-1900s. The World Health Organization is finally working toward scrapping the term “mental retardation” from its medical classification list. Let’s strive to scrap it from our vocabularies as well.



**Scan to access the R-Word website for more sources and information.**

# **What’s Wrong with ‘Retard’?**

**By** [**Soeren Palumbo**](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/soeren-palumbo) **and** [**Tim Shriver**](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/tim-shriver-jr)

Over the past five years, Spread the Word to End the Word has elicited thousands of stories and perspectives answering the question “what’s wrong with ‘retard’?” But none of them have been as poignant and powerful as that given by Jonathan Franklin Stephens, a self-advocate and author with Down syndrome. While many of us bicker over things like political correctness and our constitutional right to insult, Mr. Stephens lays bare the impact of our words:

“So, what’s wrong with ‘retard’? I can only tell you what it means to me and people like me when we hear it. It means that the rest of you are excluding us from your group. We are something that is not like you and something that none of you would ever want to be. We are something outside the ‘in’ group. We are someone that is not your kind.”

Thanks to the voices of self-advocates like Mr. Stephens and student leaders around the world, people are starting to listen in ways they had never before. One conversation at time, one campus at a time, one country at a time, students of all ages have led a global effort to create a more inclusive society by bringing an end to a word and attitude that continue to marginalize and exclude people with intellectual disabilities. To date, this joined effort has persuaded millions to reconsider their hurtful use of “retard” and “retarded.”

Mr. Stephens shows us why this choice of words changes not just his world but our world. Language not only informs us, language transforms us. People say that words can be divisive. But that’s not the whole story. The words we use and the discrimination they engender don’t create walls; they make us into walls.

When we use a word like “retard” or “retarded,” we become the wall that keeps out Olivia, my beautiful 18-year-old sister with a developmental disability. We become the wall that condemns Mr. Stephens as undesirable and excluded. But just as tragically, we become the wall that isolates us from them, the wall that disables us from recognizing the wisdom imparted by Mr. Stephens and disables us from sharing the unwavering love offered by my sister.

Language transforms us. A call to reconsider the words we use with each other isn’t censorship; it’s an opportunity to find new abilities in ourselves. It’s an opportunity to embrace those that have been excluded for so long. It’s an opportunity to make up for lost time.

Just as language has transformed us into walls, we together have shown that it can transform us into bridges and open doors — bridges to connect us and doors through which to welcome the excluded. When we replace words like “retard” with others like “peer,” “co-worker,” or “friend,” we all benefit from a more complete and beautiful understanding of what it means to be human.

Today, we have the chance to build more bridges and open more doors than ever before. And it can start by changing one word.

# **Examining the Damaging Impact of the "R-Word"**

**By**[**Sarah Chrisien**](https://www.uloop.com/public-profile/1299082/Sarah-Chrisien)**on January 26, 2015**

“That’s retarded.”

How many times a day do you or someone you know use this phrase in casual conversation? More importantly, how often do you take the time to consider the impact that it has?

I have an aunt. She is funny and full of personality, and she has left a positive impact on so many people with her humorous, easy-to-please nature. She is also mentally disabled.

Growing up with her in my family has taught me so much about acceptance, patience, tolerance, and the immense value that can be found in the special needs community. However, I have also learned how narrow-minded and ill-informed people can be towards those who are different from them.

When people describe something that they consider stupid or trivial as “retarded,” they don’t often realize the implications in their words. In the past, “retarded” was a word used to describe someone who had a mental disability.

Nowadays, the word has been so generalized that I hear people use it to describe anything from their malfunctioning laptop to an unfair homework assignment. Overall, this outdated and offensive term minimizes the worth of people with special needs and equates them to something undesirable or unimportant.

I realize that people don’t usually use this term with actual malice or bad intent. However, I believe that if people took the time to consider the impact that it has, they would think twice before using it.

In the past, when I have spoken out in protest against the “R-word,” I’ve gotten many responses, varying from “It’s no big deal” to “Well, it’s not hurting anyone.”

I can assure you that it *is* a big deal, and it hurts so many people. When you refer to something as “retarded,” you not only sound ignorant, but you are insulting my aunt and everyone in the special needs community.

The perpetuating misuse of the “R-word” in today’s day and age is inexcusable. The amazing variety of the English language should allow everyone to find alternatives to their vocabulary that don’t have such damaging implications.

My hope for the future is that this ugly term will be eradicated altogether, and those with disabilities will be given the respect and consideration that they deserve. Because when you don’t think before you speak, the only thing you are insulting is yourself.