

Inclusive Language Guide

Overview

At our agency, we are committed to building a culture of belonging, well-being, and respect for everyone we serve and work alongside. Language plays a powerful role in shaping how people experience inclusion, dignity, and safety. This guide was created to support staff, volunteers, and community members in using inclusive language that reflects the diversity of our clients, families, and teams.

We recognize that language is always evolving, and each person chooses the words that best describe their own identity. This guide is not exhaustive but is meant to encourage reflection and provide practical examples. Asking respectful questions, listening, and allowing individuals to define themselves are some of the best ways to communicate authentically. It is also important to remember that not everyone will feel comfortable sharing personal details, and no one is obligated to respond.

Our goal is to avoid assumptions, reduce harm, and foster environments where everyone feels respected and valued.

Gender

Using gender-inclusive language affirms people across the gender spectrum. Small shifts in word choice can make a big difference.

Instead of...	Try...
ladies and gentlemen, guys, boys and girls	people, friends, folks, team, everyone
the girl/boy in the story	child, person, character, participant
Sweetheart/honey (as default terms)	the person's name or a neutral description
Grouping by gender	group by another characteristic (e.g., type of shoes, birthday month)

Outdated Terms: Hermaphrodite → Intersex; Transsexual/Transvestite → Transgender



Pronouns

Pronouns are part of respecting someone’s identity. Common examples include she/her, he/him, they/them. Some people may use other pronouns. Using correct pronouns shows respect; misgendering can cause harm.

It can help to share your pronouns when introducing yourself (e.g., “Hi, I’m Jordan, and I use they/them pronouns”).

Families

Families take many forms. Inclusive language helps us acknowledge and affirm this diversity.

Instead of...	Try...
Mom and Dad	grown-ups, parents, caregivers, family
Nanny/babysitter	caregiver
Real parents	birth parents
Husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend	partner, spouse, significant other

Outdated Terms: “Traditional family” – Instead, recognize that each family is unique.

Sexual Orientation

Human sexuality exists on a spectrum. Avoid heteronormative assumptions.

Instead of...	Try...
Boys have girlfriends / girls have boyfriends	People can love and commit to whomever they choose
That’s so gay	Interrupt and explain why the language is harmful

Outdated Terms: Sexual preference → Sexual orientation; Homosexual → Gay/Lesbian.

Use 2SLGBTQ+ when speaking about the broader community.



Race & Ethnicity

Respectful language about race and ethnicity means avoiding assumptions and focusing on people's chosen identities.

Instead of...	Try...
Minority	Underrepresented or members of underrepresented groups and when possible be specific. Ex. People of colour
Indian or Aboriginal	Indigenous person, First Nations, Métis, Inuit (FNMI)
What are you?	What is your cultural/ethnic background?
They faced discrimination because of their race	They faced discrimination because of racism

Outdated Terms: Colour blind, Caucasian (use white), coloured people.

Religion & Belief Systems

People's faith and spiritual practices vary widely. Avoid assumptions.

Instead of...	Try...
What religion are you?	Are any faith or spiritual traditions important to you?
Merry Christmas!	Have a wonderful holiday / Have a great break / You can also ask, "Do you celebrate Christmas?" and if the answer is yes, feel free to wish them a Merry Christmas!



Ability & Accessibility

Use person-first and strength-based language. Avoid using conditions as descriptors.

Instead of...	Try...
A disabled person	A person with a disability is what is preferred, excluding deaf person and autistic (neurodiverse people) person who prefer respective adjectives first
A person is wheelchair-bound	A person who uses a wheelchair
I'm so OCD	I'm really particular about organization

Outdated Terms: handicapped, special needs, slow learner, mentally impaired.

Mental Wellness

Combat the stigma associated with mental illness, suicide, and substance use. When writing, we recommend using person-first language as the first choice, unless you know that a specific individual or group prefers a different way of identifying themselves. When speaking with someone who has lived experience, pay attention to and ask about the language they use to describe their experiences.

Instead of...	Try...
That drives me crazy	That bothers/annoys/frustrates me
This is nuts	This is interesting/strange/peculiar/funny
They suffer from depression	They live with/are experiencing depression
They are insane/deranged/mental	They live with a mental health illness
Committed suicide, successful suicide	Died by suicide
Failed or unsuccessful suicide attempt	Attempted suicide
Substance abuse	Substance use or substance use disorder



They are a junkie...	They misuse substances...
They were an addict	They are in recovery

Socioeconomics

People's access to resources varies. Be mindful of assumptions.

Instead of...	Try...
Where did you go on vacation?	What did you do over the break?
Everyone has ____	Some people have ____

Lingo

Workplace jargon can feel impersonal or exclusionary. Using people-centered and collaborative terms helps create a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Instead of...	Try...
Stakeholder	Partners, Collaborators, Allies, Supporters, Contributors, Advocates, Community members, Co-creator
Residential	Supported Living, Supported Group Living
Master Schedule	Rotational Schedule

Key Concepts & Shared Values

- Equity: Fair outcomes, not just equal treatment.
- Inclusion: Ensuring everyone feels welcome and has access to full participation.
- Intersectionality: Recognizing how overlapping identities affect experiences of discrimination.
- Microaggressions: Everyday comments or behaviours that, whether intentionally or not, exclude or demean people.
- Anti-racism: Actively challenging policies, practices, and attitudes that uphold racial inequity.





Final Note

Inclusive language is a journey, not a checklist.

This guide is a living resource. Inclusive language is about respect, humility, and a willingness to learn. It is a journey, not a checklist. By being intentional with our words, we can contribute to safer, more welcoming communities for everyone. When we approach conversations with curiosity, strive to reduce barriers, and genuinely care about not causing harm, we create space for connection and growth.

Perfection isn't the goal—progress is. As long as we're intentional and open to learning, we're moving in the right direction. Just remember - if you make a mistake, briefly apologize, correct yourself, and move on. Avoid over-explaining or placing emotional labour on the other person.

