



Inclusive Language: Considerations for Use

Created with support and reviewed by individuals on the spectrum.

Words matter and using respectful and inclusive language can make a big difference. The goal of inclusive language is to respect people across race, class, gender and ability. This is also true when discussing Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Each autistic person experiences the world in a different way. This includes how they think, interact with the sensory world around them, communicate, and more. Being respectful of these differences through the use of inclusive language can have a positive impact on everyone.

It is also important to avoid ableist language. Ableist language assumes disabled people are not as good as nondisabled people. This is harmful as it excludes, devalues, and ignores disabled people.

Below are some common phrases that can be adjusted to be more inclusive. These phrases are preferred by many in the autism community, but autistic individuals may have specific preferences that are different from these examples. As with anyone, asking an autistic person their preferences should take priority.

INSTEAD OF.....	TRY THIS...
autism symptoms	autistic characteristics/traits/features
person with autism	autistic person
deficit	difference
treatment	supports/services/strategies/accommodations
person with a disability	disabled person
suffers from autism	impact/effect of autism
normal	neurotypical/non-autistic/person without autism
typical person/typical peer	non-autistic person/typically developing peer

Instead of.....	Try this...
differently abled	disabled
different ability	disability
mental retardation	intellectual disability
high functioning	low support needs
low functioning	high support needs
autism as a “puzzle”	autism as a part of neurodiversity (people interact and experience the world differently)
cure	supports/accommodations/quality of life outcomes
disorder	condition/disability
non-verbal	non-speaking
special interests	focused interests
at risk for autism	increased likelihood of autism
burden of autism	impact/effect of autism



Here are some examples of what NOT to say or assume:

“You don’t look autistic”.

Autism is a broad spectrum and impacts everyone differently and because you can’t “see” autism, it may surprise you when someone discloses they are autistic. This is not a compliment. You should respect the individual who shares their diagnosis and if you need to say anything, ask if there is any way you can support or accommodate them in that moment.

“You seem normal.”

Again, each autistic individual is unique and the word normal is offensive. If you are surprised by someone who shares their autism diagnosis rather than comment, you could explain that you know very little about autism and ask how you can support or accommodate them.

“You must be good at math/music/art”.

This perpetuates an often misunderstood stereotype. Ask instead, “What are your interests?”

“What’s it like to be autistic?”

Instead you could ask, “From your experience where can accommodations and the disability experience be improved, where are people and places doing a good job?”

Asking a question about the autistic person to a parent, caregiver or support professional when the autistic individual is standing right there. Presume competence.



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