

Human Rights Commission: Language Do's and Don'ts

We live in a respectful community. But, do you ever feel nervous about saying the wrong thing, or being offensive when you don't mean to be? We all do!

Here are some tips to improve our communications around diversity (from the American Psychological Association: [Inclusive Language Guide](#)):

Use person-first language, where the person is emphasized, not the disability.

Person-first language: Terms to avoid and suggested alternatives

| Term to avoid | Suggested alternative |
|---|--|
| wheelchair-bound confined to a wheelchair | person who uses a wheelchair wheelchair user |
| mentally ill crazy insane mental defect suffers from or is afflicted with [condition] | person living with a mental illness person with a preexisting mental health disorder person with a preexisting behavioral health disorder person with a diagnosis of a mental illness/mental health disorder/behavioral health disorder |
| asylum | psychiatric hospital/facility |
| drug user/abuser addict | person who uses drugs person who injects drugs person with substance use disorder |
| alcoholic alcohol abuser | person with alcohol use disorder person in recovery from substance use/alcohol disorder |
| person taking/prescribed medication-assisted treatment (MAT) | person taking/prescribed medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) |
| person who relapsed | person who returned to use |
| smoker | person who smokes |
| homeless people the homeless | people without housing people experiencing homelessness |

| Term to avoid | Suggested alternative |
|-----------------------|---|
| transient populations | people experiencing unstable housing/housing insecurity/people who are not securely housed people experiencing unsheltered homelessness clients/guests who are accessing homeless services people experiencing houselessness people experiencing housing or food insecurity |
| prostitute | person who engages in sex work sex worker (abbreviated as SWer) |
| prisoner convict | person who is/has been incarcerated |
| slave | person who is/was enslaved |

Ageism: Terms to avoid and suggested alternatives

| Term to avoid | Suggested alternative | Comment |
|--|--|--|
| <p>the elderly elderly people the aged aging dependents seniors senior citizens</p> | <p>older adults older people persons 60 years and older older population older individuals</p> | <p>Avoid language that promotes stereotypes that “other” older adults. However, please note that in certain cultures, the term “Elder” is considered an honorific.</p> |
| <p>geriatric pregnancy</p> | <p>advanced maternal age pregnancy at age 35 or older</p> | <p>Use person-first language to describe the age of a pregnant person. Older pregnant people may benefit from additional screening.</p> |
| <p>silver tsunami</p> | <p>age-related population changes age-related demographic changes</p> | <p>Use affirmative language specific to demographic information.</p> |

Sexual orientation and gender diversity: Terms to avoid and suggested alternatives

| Term to avoid | Suggested alternative | Comment |
|---|---|---|
| birth sex natal sex | assigned sex sex assigned at birth | |
| born a girl, born female born a boy, born male | assigned female at birth (AFAB) assigned male at birth (AMAB) | |
| female to male male to female | assigned female at birth (AFAB) assigned male at birth (AMAB) | |
| hermaphrodite she-male, he-female tranny transvestite transsexual | intersex LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, LBGTQIA+, etc. transgender person transgender people trans and gender nonbinary folks or folx genderqueer queer | Some people may use terms to describe themselves and others that may be perceived as pejorative but are empowering for those individuals and their communities. “Tranny” or “queer” are examples of such terms. Some members of the LGBTQ+ community have reclaimed them, whereas others may consider them offensive. |
| transgendered | transgender | “Transgendered is a dated term that suggests a point in time when a person ‘became’ transgender, which diverges from the lived experiences of most transgender people” (National Institutes of Health, 2023, Transgender, trans definition). |