Disability Inclusive Language Guide

This document is meant to guide employers and their staff regarding the use of inclusive language for disability. It will also highlight some terminology you may hear within different disability communities.

Please note: This document will be updated as language continues to evolve. It was last updated in July 2024 and has been peer-reviewed by people with a variety of disabilities and employer members from our network.

Plain language: What is a Disability?

Based on the Accessible Canada Act and the Equity Act, in 2023, Accessible Employers produced a plain language translation of Canada's definition of disability. This was created to ensure that the definition of disability can be fully understood by everyone. The plain language definition of disability that was created is:

A disability is a condition that affects your mind or body. It could always be present or it could come and go. A disability may stop you from doing the things you want to do.

Barriers that get in your way could be:

- physical, such as a curb or a heavy door,
- other people's attitudes about you,
- the expected ways of doing things that are not easy for you.

A disability could be:

- physical - such as having a hard time using your legs or arms.
- sensory - such as not being able to see or hear.
- mental health - such as having emotions that limit your daily activities or being unable to be in control of your thoughts.
- learning - such as having a hard time with reading, writing or math.

- communication - such as needing technology to help talk with others.
- intellectual - such as needing help from others with everyday tasks like managing money and organizing time.
- cognitive - such as having a hard time thinking, remembering and doing things in order.
- functional limitation - such as not being able to walk very far because of a heart condition or being in pain a lot of the time.

Inclusive Disability Terminology

Part of creating inclusive and accessible spaces is using inclusive language. The following information about specific disability terminology is meant to provide some disability culture-specific perspectives and learnings. It is not meant to provide an invitation to stall on addressing disability in our workplaces or communities.

As Untapped Accessibility notes, "While respectful language is an important question, dwelling on it too much distracts us from the larger harms and tangible social inequities experienced by people with disabilities. Disabled people face higher rates of unemployment, they still get paid less than nondisabled people, and they still experience large disparities in their access to programs, services and facilities."

We invite you to learn about some of the language used within various groups of the disability community.

Section 1: Thematic Terminology

Person-first language.

Person-first language, such as "people with disabilities," is frequently used by the BC Government, many disability organizations, and other institutions. In the disability community, this term is sometimes preferred and sometimes not.

Why? Those in favour of person-first language say that it puts the person first and the disability second, referencing that people should not be defined by their disability.

Opponents would say they are proud of their identity, and that their disability is integral to who they are in a world that is not built for their bodies. In the Social Model of Disability, the person has been disabled by societal conditions, rather than by their disability or by their health condition.

Identity-first language.

Within the disability community, some people prefer identity-first language. Examples include saying things like, "disabled person" or "autistic person." This is similar to a person placing their race or sexual orientation in front. For example, one might say "I'm a Black woman" or "I'm a queer person."

Since Accessible Employers works with the government, disability communities and businesses, we use these terms interchangeably. This aims to recognize that disability language is ever-changing and dependent on situational or individual preferences.

> The word "disabled" is a description, not a group of people. Use "disabled people" or "people with disabilities" not "the disabled" as a collective term.

Lived experience.

When we are trying to make systemic change, the perspectives of those most impacted by the system — in our case people who have lived the experience of disability in our society — have a unique and integral kind of expertise that cannot be replaced by academic research, empathy, or professional tenure.

> It is important to place value on lived experience and show this by engaging disabled people, centering them in our work, and paying them for their expertise.

Nothing about us, without us.

At the core of this principle is the belief that people with disabilities should be consulted and be leaders in any actions that affect them, as they are the experts.

Within Accessible Employers we have incorporated the principle of "nothing about us without us" into several of our initiatives:

- Our Presidents Group advisory committee began and continues to champion our Pledge to Measure initiative. This measures the number of staff and senior leaders who have a disability internally.
- We hire staff with disabilities to lead our projects.
- We invite people with a variety of disabilities to user-test our materials.

Ableism.

Ableism can be defined as discrimination against disabled people in favour of people who do not have a disability. It can make it difficult for people with disabilities to participate in school, jobs, or community activities.

Ableism is based on the belief that people with disabilities cannot do certain things *because of* their disability. It values people based on what is seen as "normal." It unfairly places responsibility on people with disabilities to overcome these challenges to belong.

Unlike the Social Model of Disability, ableism doesn't challenge communities or places to become more welcoming and accessible. When we recognize ableism and remove the barriers it creates, we acknowledge that everyone deserves to be valued.

Avoid using: euphemisms instead of disability.

Euphemisms are terms such as "diverse-ability," "diversability," "differently-abled," "handicapable," "specially-abled," and a variety of others.

While there is some tolerance for these terms by some people with disabilities, they are no longer broadly accepted. Many see these terms as a sugar-coating of the reality of being disabled, or as being paternalistic or demeaning. These terms should no longer be used by non-disabled people, leaving room to respect individual disabled peoples' choices in self-identification.

Additionally, the BC Provincial Government's guidance on inclusive language recommends avoiding these terms.

Avoid using: "special needs."

This is another euphemism that is still used in some spaces, particularly in the education sector. It is now seen as being unacceptable and factually inaccurate.

Accessibility and inclusion for all are not "special" requests. People with disabilities have human rights and the legal right to accommodations that create equitable environments. It is much better to use the term "disability," which aligns with human rights protections.

Avoid using: "handicapped."

Another outdated piece of terminology that is being phased out of common use and removed from language in formal institutions is the use of "handicapped," which was once used in reference to people with disabilities or accessible services.

You might still have "handicapped parking stalls" or other services. Consider calling them "accessible parking spots," a "wheelchair-accessible vehicle," or an "accessible bathroom" instead.

The term originated from the idea that people with disabilities were "hand-in-cap" – a reference to beggars on the street. This provides an image of people with disabilities that is negative and incorrect.

Section 2: Community-Specific Terminology

Autism, neurodivergence, and neurodiversity.

This is another area where personal choice should be considered. Some individuals will say they are "autistic," as opposed to saying they are "a person with autism." It is fine to say that someone is "on the autism spectrum," although you should avoid saying "suffers from" or "is afflicted by."

For some autistic individuals, person-first language ("person with autism") really doesn't work. For literal thinkers, it may create the image of their autism being something they carry around with them, like a purse.

The term "neurodiverse" aims to normalize the range of differences in thinking that are present in our society. When speaking about an individual, they are not "diverse" as an individual, they are "neurodivergent." The opposite is "neurotypical."

A note on imagery: Much of the autistic or neurodivergent community prefers to not be associated with puzzle piece imagery as they often have been in the past. This use emerged from a charity that many strongly oppose, and many people feel it perpetuates negative stereotypes and history where people with autism were seen as a puzzle to be solved or as having a negative puzzling condition.

A common shift in imagery for neurodivergence now is to use a rainbow infinity sign representative of the diverse range of individuals and experiences found within this community.

Blind, deafblind and low vision.

"Blind" is fine as an adjective (ex. "a blind person," "the blind community") or as a noun (ex. "people who are blind"). But generally, avoid using this word as a noun after the article "the" (ex. "the blind").

Avoid using "vision impaired" and "visually impaired." Most people who are legally blind have some amount of vision and may be described as having "low vision." Using these words compares vision to the "norm" and portrays low vision as a negative, which continues stigma.

A person who has a substantial combination of loss in sight and hearing, which can significantly impact how one accesses information, is a "person who is deafblind" or a "Deafblind person."

D/deafness and Hard of Hearing (HoH).

Many deaf people whose first language is ASL consider themselves part of "the Deaf community" and they may describe themselves as "Deaf," with a capital "D," to emphasize their identity. This is also an assertion of their distinct language and culture.

A person may also be hard of hearing, or not born deaf, and therefore not see themselves as part of a deaf community with a capital "D," and use a lowercase "d." Some choose to write "d/Deaf" as a way of recognizing both experiences.

Developmental and intellectual disabilities.

In some provinces in Canada, "developmental disability" is preferred, while in others "intellectual disability" is preferred, though these are often used interchangeably.

Some people with autism may also have an intellectual disability, and we often see programs designed to serve people with both autism and intellectual disabilities.

Language to avoid: "Down's syndrome" (there's no apostrophe + s), "Downs," "brain damaged," "handicapped," "high functioning" or "low functioning," "special needs," and the word "retard" in any form.

Mental health disabilities.

In the 2017 Canadian Census, mental health disorders were officially recognized as disabilities. This significantly changed the number of people with a recognized disability in Canada.

Mental health disorders include depression, bipolar spectrum, anxiety, phobias, eating disorders, schizophrenia, personality disorders, substance use and addiction, and many others. These disorders are included under the neurodivergent umbrella as well, and many people will identify as neurodivergent without disclosing the specific term.

Fighting stigmas about mental health can start with the language we choose to use and choose not to use. We must be conscious not to further support stigmas towards certain conditions by using outdated, biased terminology.

Terms to avoid: “crazy,” “mentally ill,” “addict,” “substance abuse,” “insane.”

Non-speaking and assisted communication.

A variety of people with disabilities may be non-speaking. This can be due to an intellectual or developmental disability, neurological disability, motor speech disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or a physical disability that impacts how one speaks. Communication disabilities can be developed or acquired.

> Just because someone is not able to speak, does not mean they do not communicate. It also doesn’t mean they don’t understand you.
>
> Take a moment to observe other ways people might be communicating and allow them to communicate in their own ways.

Some people may use high-tech assistive communication devices, called Augmentative and Alternative Communication Devices (AAC), or more low-tech systems where they communicate via paper, gestures, or texting.

Terms to avoid: “can’t talk,” “non-verbal.”

Print disabilities.

The Presidents Group Member BC Libraries Cooperative introduced us to the term “print disabilities” via their organization, the National Network for Equitable Library Services (NNELS).

Print disabilities refer to a subset of disabilities that may be due to a mobility, cognitive, or visual impairment, which prevents people from reading physical print materials. This includes vision loss and blindness like one might commonly expect, but also encompasses physical disabilities that impede the physical moving of pages, as well as cognitive disabilities that impact one’s understanding of the information on the page.

Quick Review of Terminology: Avoid These and Use These Instead

Avoid These Terms	Use These Terms Instead
Differently-abled; specially-abled; diversability; person of determination; and other euphemisms.	Disabled person or person with a disability.
Handicapped (referring to a person).	Person with a disability or disabled person.
Handicapped (referring to a service, such as a washroom, parking stall, or vehicle).	Accessible [washroom, parking stall, vehicle].
Special needs.	Disability.
Crazy; mentally ill; insane; or using a disorder as a verb (ex. "you're so OCD").	Mental health disability or person with lived experience of mental illness.
Brain damaged, special needs, handicapped, retard, high functioning or low functioning.	Developmental disability or intellectual disability.
Down's Syndrome; Downs.	Down syndrome.
Addict; substance abuse; junkie.	In recovery; substance use or substance use disorder; uses substances.

Non-verbal; can't communicate.	Non-speaking or person who uses assistive technology.
The disabled or the blind.	The disability community; the blind community.
Suffers from a disability or suffers from [type of disability]; afflicted by.	Has a disability or has [type of disability].
Wheelchair-bound; confined to a wheelchair.	Wheelchair-user or uses a wheelchair.
My colleague is neurodiverse.	My colleague is neurodivergent. My workplace is neurodiverse.
Vision impaired; visually impaired.	Low vision.

Do's and Don'ts of Disability-Inclusive Language

The question of appropriate language choices is constantly evolving, and different audiences will have different tolerances and preferences.

Ask the person.

If a person shares that they have a disability, ask if they have a disability language preference. Some people have strong preferences and others may not.

Don't impose your idea of "correct" language on them, even if that's what someone else used in conversation in the past. If you don't understand the use of certain terms or perspectives—ask.

Don't paint disability as a tragedy.

Avoid phrases like 'suffers from' which suggest discomfort, constant pain, and a sense of hopelessness. Wheelchair users do not view themselves as 'confined to a wheelchair' or 'wheelchair bound'—try 'uses a wheelchair' instead.

Take the disabled person's lead.

Most disabled people are comfortable with the words used to describe daily living. People who use wheelchairs 'go for walks' and people with vision loss may be very pleased – or not – 'to see you'.

A disability may just mean that some things are done differently, but it also may not!

If you make a mistake, apologize and move on

People with disabilities are generally used to educating others about their needs and preferences and understand that things will not always go perfectly.

Some people may be offended by the use of outdated language, but if you apologize and explain you didn't know, they will hopefully understand, and you have an opportunity to learn and do better.

Next Steps

You've read this comprehensive document—now what? Your learning shouldn't stop here.

We encourage you to continue listening to the experiences of disabled people in your communities, your workplaces, and your lives. With 27% or more Canadians having one or more disabilities, disability is present in every room.

For workplaces specifically, we are here to continue the dialogue via Accessible Employers!

If your organization is not yet part of the Community of Accessible Employers, we encourage you to get connected. This provides your organization with access to resources, staff support, opportunities for dialogue, and online learning courses.

If your workplace is already connected, subscribe to our newsletter and social media accounts to stay informed. You'll get to learn from people with a variety of disability experiences at events, stay up to date on trends and research about accessible workplace development, and connect with other individuals passionate about prioritizing inclusive workplaces.

Resources

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