

A guide for employers

Inclusive Language in the Workplace



Contents

Introduction	3.
Principles of inclusive language	5.
Why is inclusive language important?	6.
What are the barriers?	9.
Age	10.
Sex and gender	12.
Gender reassignment	15.
Sexual orientation	16.
Marital/relationship status	18.
New parents and pregnant people	19.
Race, ethnicity, nationality and national origins	20.
Religion and beliefs	23.
Disability	24.
Mental health	28.
Where to access support?	30.
Social inclusion and language	32.
Intersectionality	33.
Friendly reminders	35.
Helpful resources	36.

Introduction

When it comes to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), language plays a crucial role.

The words we use have the power to either include individuals and communities or alienate and exclude them. They can reflect and respect the diversity of people's identities, experiences and backgrounds or serve to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

If you are reading this guide, it's a good sign that you recognise the importance of using inclusive language in the workplace. Nonetheless, discussions around language can be daunting. Well-meaning employers often worry about making mistakes or inadvertently causing offence, often due to a lack of knowledge.

That's why we have created this guide, which we hope will help you to understand the importance of inclusive language, how it can be used to make a positive difference in your workplace, and the role it plays in dismantling or perpetuating issues such as ageism, ableism and sexism.

Due to the ever-evolving nature of language, and the fact that it means different things to different people, it's impossible to talk in any definitive terms or offer any set rules to abide by. However, we hope that this guide will serve as a helpful starting point for you to have your own discussions in an open, safe environment.

Before delving into this guide, it's important to first understand what we mean by 'discriminatory language'.

Discriminatory language is covered by the Equality Act 2010, specifically the nine 'protected characteristics':

1. Age
2. Sex
3. Gender reassignment
4. Sexual orientation
5. Marriage and civil partnership
6. Pregnancy and maternity
7. Race (including ethnic or national origins, colour and nationality)
8. Religion or belief
9. Disability

Discriminatory language includes words and phrases that:

- Reinforce stereotypes;
- Reinforce derogatory labels;
- Exclude certain groups of people through assumptions, e.g. assuming that the male or white population is the norm;
- Patronise or trivialise certain people or groups, or their experiences; and
- Cause discomfort or offence.

In this guide, we will explore the use of discriminatory language as it relates to each protected characteristic, including certain terms to avoid and suggestions for more inclusive language. We will also cover areas not covered by the Equality Act, such as social inclusion, as these are also important to understand.

Please note: The content/legislation within this guide refers only to England, Wales and Scotland. It does not cover Northern Ireland.

Principles of inclusive language

When speaking about inclusive language, some general principles apply. Here are 8 important things to keep in mind that will help to ensure language is inclusive:

1. **Approach any group interactions with care and consideration**, recognising the diversity within and between groups, and ensure they are consistently framed in inclusive terms.
2. **Use people-centric language** which focuses on the person and reflects the individuality of people. People-centric language does not classify or stereotype people based on their association or identity with a group or culture.
3. **Only reference personal attributes or characteristics when it is relevant** to the context.
4. **Consider a strengths-based approach** (recognising the agility of people and focusing on abilities, knowledge and capacities) rather than a deficit approach (focusing on the deficiencies of a person or group of people).
5. Where appropriate, **ask about the language the person prefers** and respect their wishes. Do not make assumptions about people or their characteristics based on stereotypes or limited information.
6. **Be conscious of the implications of your language**. Avoid excluding others or making people invisible by your choice of language. Avoid language and expressions that disparage or trivialise others.
7. Where possible, **empower the person or group to speak for themselves**. If you do need to speak on the behalf of a group of people, it's very important that you consult widely to ensure that the language you use is reflective of the group.
8. **Address and remove stereotypes and myths**. If someone uses inappropriate language in your presence, speak out against it and correct the inappropriate language used, if safe.

Remember, the ultimate goal of inclusive language is to:

“Create an environment in which everyone is empowered to speak and feels confident that their voice will be heard”

What if I get it wrong?

If you are making the effort to use respectful language and be inclusive, then it's okay to make mistakes along your journey. When we are learning, it's inevitable that we will occasionally make mistakes. If this happens, apologise, learn from it, and move on without getting defensive – you can keep trying and do better next time.

You should, however, be aware that repeated mistakes indicate a lack of respect and can be very distressing. If it continues or is deliberate, it could constitute bullying or discrimination, which is unlawful.

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better do better.”

Maya Angelou



Why is inclusive language important?

Everyone is unique and brings their own individual perspectives to the workplace. To gain the benefits of this diversity, employers must embed an inclusive culture where everyone feels comfortable voicing their own opinions and ideas.

Employers should create a workplace culture which encourages everyone to be themselves at work. An inclusive culture leads to engaged people, increases productivity, reduces turnover and sickness rates, and delivers better outcomes.

Everyone has a role to play in creating a more inclusive culture, and the language we use is pivotal to this. Here are just some reasons why inclusive language is important:

Fostering respect and dignity: Inclusive language shows respect and acknowledges the dignity of all individuals. It ensures that everyone feels valued and recognised, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other characteristic. Using respectful and inclusive language helps foster a sense of belonging and promotes a positive and inclusive work environment.

Representation: Inclusive language ensures that individuals from diverse backgrounds are accurately and respectfully represented. It acknowledges and includes people of different races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, and other identities. By using inclusive language, workplaces can reflect the true diversity of their employees, creating a more inclusive and equitable environment.

Avoiding stereotypes and bias: Language can perpetuate stereotypes and biases if not used carefully. Inclusive language challenges and breaks down stereotypes by promoting accurate and respectful representations of diverse groups. It helps avoid assumptions and generalisations, allowing individuals to be seen and heard as their authentic selves.

Enhancing communication and understanding: Inclusive language improves communication by promoting clarity and understanding. It helps individuals express themselves effectively and be understood without facing barriers or misunderstandings due to offensive or exclusionary language. It facilitates open and honest dialogue, encouraging diverse perspectives and experiences to be shared and valued.






Attracting and retaining talent: An inclusive language approach demonstrates an organisation's commitment to diversity and inclusion, which can attract a wider range of talent. Prospective employees are more likely to be drawn to workplaces that prioritise inclusive language and create an environment where they feel respected and valued. Inclusive language also contributes to employee satisfaction, engagement and retention by fostering a sense of belonging and promoting equal opportunities.

Ultimately, language is a powerful tool that employers can utilise to build inclusive and equitable workplaces where individuals from all walks of life feel valued, respected and recognised for their unique contributions, enabling them to thrive.

In this way, inclusive language doesn't just benefit employees; it is crucial for any employer that wants to harness the full potential of their workforce.

What are the barriers?

In our experience, employers often fear inclusive language for a variety of reasons:

-  **Lack of awareness:** Some employers may not have a deep understanding of inclusive language and its importance in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. They may be unaware of the potential harm caused by exclusive or offensive language and the benefits of using inclusive language.
-  **Fear of making mistakes:** Language is complex and constantly evolving, and navigating inclusive language can be challenging. Employers may fear unintentionally using outdated or inappropriate terminology and inadvertently causing offense. The fear of making mistakes can lead to hesitancy in engaging in conversations about inclusive language.
-  **Repercussions and backlash:** Similarly, employers may worry about potential backlash or negative consequences if they make a misstep with inclusive language. In today's society, where social media and public scrutiny are prevalent, a single inappropriate word or phrase can spread quickly and damage an organisation's reputation.
-  **Resistance to change:** Some employers may resist embracing inclusive language because it requires a shift in mindset and language habits. Changing established language patterns and terminology may be perceived as challenging or unnecessary by some individuals or within certain organisational cultures.
-  **Uncertainty and complexity:** Inclusive language involves being aware of the nuances and impact of words, understanding different cultural contexts, and keeping up with evolving terminology. This complexity can create a sense of uncertainty and make employers hesitant to engage in conversations around inclusive language.

Addressing these fears requires education, training and open dialogue. Employers can overcome their fears by fostering a culture of learning, providing resources and guidance on inclusive language, and encouraging open discussions about its importance and impact.

Although inclusive language may initially seem daunting, avoiding it can lead to bigger issues such as grievances. While it is unrealistic to expect employers to possess complete knowledge on the subject, in our experience, most are receptive to learning. Rather than sidestepping the issue altogether, it is far more productive to ask questions in a safe and respectful manner, as this encourages growth and understanding.



Respecting people's age through inclusive language



Ageism in the workplace is a significant issue and can be a serious barrier to younger and older people having an equal opportunity to contribute to, participate in, and be valued in the workplace.

According to the UK Government Equalities Office, around 10% of people aged 16 to 64 reported experiencing age discrimination in the workplace:

- **Older workers** often face challenges related to limited career progression, reduced opportunities for training and development, and higher rates of involuntary job loss. This not only hampers their financial security but also impacts their overall wellbeing and sense of purpose.
- At the same time, **younger workers** can face stereotypes and biases that undermine their abilities, expertise and potential for growth. This hinders their opportunities for advancement and recognition, impeding their career progression and job satisfaction.

It's essential to recognise the pivotal role that language plays in shaping this experience of ageism for both younger and older workers. The words we choose and the language we use can perpetuate or challenge age-related stereotypes and biases.

By being mindful of this fact and using more respectful and inclusive language, we can contribute to a workplace that values the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals at every stage of their careers.

Helpful guidelines:

⊘ Avoid

When defining age ranges, don't exclude older workers or lump them into one broad category, e.g. Under 20, 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, over 60, etc.



- "The elderly"
- "Aged"
- "Old people"
- "Senior citizens"
- "Pensioner"



"Middle-aged workforce"



"Young at heart"



"Kids"



"Youngster"



When writing job adverts and descriptions, avoid terms such as "X years' experience", "mature", "young", etc.



When interviewing candidates, avoid asking age-related questions, e.g. "how would you feel about managing older/younger people?"



✓ Instead, use

Under 16, 16-19, 20-24, 25-29... and increase in blocks of 5 years (up to 75+)

- "Older person"
- "Older people"
- "Older adult"

"Experienced workforce"

"Energetic, driven"

"Young person"

"Teenager"

Focus on the skills and aptitudes required. Use relevant words relating to the desired attributes, e.g. "proven experience", "good communication skills"

Concentrate on the competencies required, e.g. "what skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team?"

The key is to use language that focuses on skills, experience and contributions rather than age.

It's important to note that fostering age inclusivity in the workplace goes beyond simply substituting one word or term for another. While there are specific terms that you may want to avoid (such as using "junior employee" rather than "youngster"), achieving true age inclusivity requires a broader mindset shift that influences how we communicate. For example:

- "You're too old for this" can be reframed as "your experience is invaluable".
- "She's just starting out; she won't contribute much" can be reframed as "she has fresh perspectives to offer".
- "They're approaching retirement, so there's no point investing in their development" can be reframed as "we value continuous growth and development for all employees, regardless of career stage".

By recognising the inherent value and worth of individuals at every stage of their careers, regardless of their age, we can shape the way we think and speak about colleagues of different ages, allowing us to move away from age-related assumptions and stereotypes.

Respecting people's sex and gender through inclusive language

The language around sex and gender identity is evolving constantly and it's important to understand the difference between these two terms.

- **Sex** is biological (male, female or intersex) and relates to genes, internal/external reproductive organs, and hormones inherited at birth.
- **Gender** can be fixed or fluid and refers to our internal sense of who we are and how we see and describe ourselves. Binary gender terms (man/woman, girl/boy) have traditional associations with sex; however, we now recognise how some people identify with a gender opposite to that which was assigned to them as a child (trans) and others identify neither as men nor women (non-binary or genderfluid).

Using gender-neutral language

Gender-neutral language aims to eliminate the practice of assigning stereotypes to individuals based on their sex.

While stereotyping can impact both men and women, women tend to bear the brunt of its effects more frequently. Historically, it was common to assume that an individual of unknown gender was male, leading to the usage of gender-specific terms like “policeman” or “stewardess.” Gender-neutral language challenges this convention by utilising inclusive alternatives such as “police officer” and “flight attendant”.

However, it is important to be mindful that using male terms as default gender-neutral terms may not always be fully inclusive, for example using the originally male term “actor” as a gender-neutral term for male and female performers. Instead, alternatives like “performer” or “actor/actress” are suggested to acknowledge and respect gender diversity in the field.



Helpful guidelines:

⊘ Avoid

“Ladies and gentlemen”, “guys”

-->

“Miss” or “Mrs”

-->

- “Girl”, “boy”
- “Son”, “daughter”
- “Mate”, “love”

-->

- “She”, “her”, “hers”;
 - “He”, “him”, “his”
- (Unless these have been specified)

-->

- “Girlfriend”/ “boyfriend”
- “Wife”/“husband”
- “Other/better half”

-->

“Mother”, “father”

-->

- “Men and women”
 - “Male and female”
- (i.e. a binary choice)

-->

“Mankind”

-->

“Chairman”

-->

“Workmanship”

-->

“Manpower”

-->

“A female doctor”, “a male nurse”

-->

“A policeman”, “a fireman”

-->

✓ Instead, use

“Everyone”, “friends and colleagues”

“Mx” if you do not know the marital status. The government widely uses Mx and many businesses have adopted this for all titles so that it is gender neutral.

The person’s name. For children, you can use “child”.

“They”, “them”, “theirs” (if other pronouns have not been specified) If pronouns (e.g. she, her, hers) have been specified, use those instead.

“Partner”, “spouse”

“Parent”, “guardian”

“Men, women and people who identify as non-binary”, “everyone” (depending on the context)

“People”, “humankind”

“Chair”

“Quality of work”

“Resources”

“A doctor”, “a nurse”

“A police officer”, “a firefighter”

Ultimately, you should avoid references to a person’s gender except where it is relevant in a discussion.

If you do not know for certain what gender to use when talking about a person’s loved ones, or if you are not sure whether someone identifies as male or female, it’s best to use neutral language until you know what terms they prefer to use.

By using gender-neutral language and making a conscious effort to replace gender-specific terms with inclusive alternatives, we can eliminate stereotypes based on sex and foster an environment of respect, equality and inclusivity for all individuals.

Respecting people's gender reassignment through inclusive language

The term 'transgender' refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. Some transgender people may transition at some point in their lives.

Transitioning involves various aspects, such as changing clothing, appearance, name, pronouns, and identity documents. Some individuals may also undergo hormone therapy or other medical procedures or surgeries as part of their transition (though it's important to note that not all transgender people pursue medical intervention, and this does not invalidate their transgender identity).

A transitioning person is the only person who can judge when their transition is complete. Recognising the significance of gender identity and the challenges faced by transgender people, the Equality Act provides protection for individuals undergoing gender reassignment. Under the Act, a person has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment if they are proposing to undergo, are undergoing, or have undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning their sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex.

Inclusive language plays a crucial role in respecting and affirming the experiences and identities of transgender individuals. By using accurate and inclusive terminology, we can foster a supportive and inclusive environment that acknowledges and upholds the rights and dignity of transgender individuals throughout their transition and beyond.

Helpful guidelines:



Avoid



Instead, use

"Transgender"

-->

"Transgender person"

"Sex change"

-->

"Gender affirming surgery"

Respecting people's sexual orientation through inclusive language

Sexual orientation describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person.

Language is often used in a way that ignores the fact that a significant proportion of the population is not heterosexual. We need to be aware that all outputs, written or verbal, may be read and heard by people of different sexual orientations. Therefore, language that we use must be inclusive and should not cause offence.

Be careful not to make assumptions about people's personal circumstances. For example, do not use terminology that assumes that everyone has a partner of a different sex. Always try to use the term that is preferred by the individual. The following terms are associated with sexual orientation:

Lesbian:

A woman who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women. Some lesbian women prefer to be referred to as gay women.

LGBTQ+:

Those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. The 'Q' is someone who is questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Bisexual:

A person who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender.

Gay:

A man who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual orientation towards men. The preferred term to describe homosexual men. Gay is also a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality – again, some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian.

Helpful guidelines:

⊘ Avoid

“Homosexual”

- “Lesbians”
- “Gays”
- “Bisexuals”

“Heterosexuals”

“Sexual preference”

- “Girlfriend”/
“boyfriend”
- “Wife”/
“husband”

Do not use ‘LGBTQ+’ if you are only talking about gender or gender identity.

-->

-->

-->

-->

-->

-->

✓ Instead, use

“Gay person”

- “Lesbian people”
- “Gay people”
- “Bisexual people”

“Heterosexual people”

“Sexual orientation”

- “Partner”
- “Spouse”

Only use ‘LGBTQ+’ when referring to both sexual orientation and gender identity-based communities.



Respecting people's marital/relationship status through inclusive language

In the UK, same-sex couples have been able to form a legally recognised relationship, known as a civil partnership, since 2005. A civil partnership ends only on a formal dissolution or annulment, or on the death of one of the parties.

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 extends marriage to same sex couples, and couples can have a civil marriage in registry offices across England and Wales.

There are very few occasions where a person's relationship status is relevant to their professional life. As such, when speaking with colleagues, we should make every effort to ask ourselves "is this actually pertinent?" and use inclusive language to avoid unnecessary assumptions or enquiries about someone's relationship status or the gender of their partner.



Helpful guidelines:

- **When asking about marital status, it is better to ask about a person's "relationship status", or about their "marital/civil partnership status".** It is important that "relationship status" includes the options of "single", "married / civil partner", "divorced / dissolved civil partnership" and "widow / widower / surviving civil partner".
- **Avoid assuming someone's marital status or their partner's gender based on gender stereotypes.** For example, don't assume that because someone is a woman, they have a husband rather than a wife. Instead, use gender-neutral language when discussing someone's partner or spouse, such as "partner" or "spouse", until you have accurate information about their relationship.
- **Respect personal privacy and avoid unnecessary enquiries about someone's relationship status.** Unless it's directly relevant to a professional context or conversation, it's best to refrain from asking about someone's relationship status altogether. Recognise that personal relationships are personal, and individuals have the right to determine if and when they wish to share such information.

Respecting diverse relationship configurations and personal boundaries is crucial for fostering inclusivity. By refraining from assumptions about marital status or partner's gender, and avoiding unnecessary questions about relationship status, we demonstrate respect for individual identities, relationships and personal privacy.

Letting individuals share information about their relationships on their own terms promotes a culture of respect and consideration for personal boundaries, creating a more inclusive environment overall.

Respecting new parents and pregnant people through inclusive language

Gender inequality is reflected in traditional ideas about the roles of women and men. Though they have shifted over time, the assumptions and stereotypes that underpin those ideas are often deeply rooted.

The best way to avoid making these assumptions is to adopt a gender-neutral approach wherever possible. Parents are involved in a broad spectrum of relationships, so using more neutral terms like “parents” or “guardians” may be more appropriate.

It has been common to assume a woman will have children, look after them and take a break from paid work or work part-time to

accommodate the family. If a woman is forgetful during pregnancy, this is often referred to as her ‘baby brain’. However, such assumptions and stereotypes can and often do have the effect of seriously disadvantaging women.

Additionally, it is better to use the term “pregnant people” as this is inclusive of intersex men and transmen who may get pregnant.

Rather than making assumptions, it is always best to ask new parents about their plans and needs.

People may also have caring responsibilities for aging relatives or those with disabilities or other health issues, so may need consideration for those responsibilities too.

Helpful guidelines:



Avoid

“Mother”/“father”

-->



Instead, use

“Parent(s)”

“Expectant mother”

-->

“Pregnant person”

Respecting people's race, ethnicity, nationality and national origins through inclusive language

The UK is a racially and culturally diverse place. Using inclusive language is about valuing people from any background. Our values guide us to adapt according to audience and context, adding a touch of warmth where appropriate.

Race is an area where language changes particularly quickly, and what's acceptable to some may not be acceptable to others. No individual is just one single thing and, therefore, no one can be summarised with a single word.

Cultures and identities are continually changing, not least because of the interactions they have with each other. **It is best to be guided by the terms people use to describe themselves.**

Race v ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are often regarded as the same thing – both are social constructs used to categorise and characterise at an individual and group level.

While there can be overlap between the two terms, it is helpful to understand the difference and how this impacts inclusive language.

- **Race** is used to describe shared physical traits, particularly skin colour and hair texture, and a shared ancestry or historical experience as a result.
- **Ethnicity** is more frequently chosen by the individual and linked to cultural expression and is therefore more of a

personal choice. The term is used to describe shared cultural or national identity, such as language, nationality, religious expression, and other customs.

You should only use a person's race to identify or describe them if it is directly relevant to the point you are making. It is important not to assume that a person's appearance defines their nationality or cultural background. If it is relevant, and you are unsure what ethnic or national descriptors to use, take care to ask people which descriptors they identify with.

Do not stereotype or make positive or negative generalisations about members of a particular race, ethnic, cultural or national group.



Helpful guidelines:

⊘ Avoid

“BAME people”

-->

- “Non-white people”
- “People of colour”
- “Coloured people”

-->

- “Mixed”
- “Mixed heritage”
- “Mixed race”

-->

- “Ethnic minorities”
- “Minority groups”

-->

“Black list” / “white list”

-->

✓ Instead, use

“Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic people” (spell out the acronym instead)

- “Asian people”
- “Black people”
- “White people”

“People of X and Y heritage” (for example, People of White and Black Caribbean heritage)

“Minority Ethnic groups”

“Block list” / “allow list”

***Note:** As an example of how language changes, previously in the UK, BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) was the terminology used to describe people of non-white descent; however, this did not accurately reflect the individual cultures, faiths and experiences of many different nationalities, races and ethnicities.

If you are referring to a group of people who are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity backgrounds, then use this wording in full (or “people from ethnically diverse communities”). When referring to a specific group, use the relevant descriptor (e.g. “Asian people”).



Respecting people's religion and beliefs through inclusive language

Not everyone defines their identity in terms of a religion – all human beings have beliefs and values. The accurate use of language in these aspects of human experience demonstrates respect for the beliefs of others.

- **Religion** means any religion, or a lack of religion.
- **Belief** means any religious or philosophical belief, or a lack of belief.

It is a simple and important mark of respect for others if we use language that is appropriate to them. For example, to ask a Jewish or Muslim person their “Christian name” not only makes no sense but is also highly disrespectful of their beliefs. Here, the use of the term “first name” or “forename” prevents any misunderstanding and acknowledges that people have different beliefs.

Importantly, **you should not assume a person's religious belief by their name or country of origin**, nor should you make assumptions about individuals based on their professed religion or belief system.

According to the 2021 census*, some of the most commonly practiced religions and beliefs in Britain are:

- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Judaism
- Sikhism
- No religion

Helpful guidelines:

Avoid

“Christian name”

-->

“Surname”

-->

“Faith”

-->

- “Christians”
- “Hindus”
- “Jews”
- “Muslims” etc.

-->

Instead, use

- “First name”
- “Forename”

- “Second name”
- “Family name” or “last name”

- “Religion”
- “Belief”

- “Christian people”
- “Hindu people”
- “Jewish people”
- “Muslim people”, etc. (or “community”)

Respecting people's disability through inclusive language

Under the Equality Act definition, a person is considered disabled if they have a **physical or mental impairment** that has a **substantial and long-term adverse effect** on their ability to carry out **normal day-to-day activities**. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 16.0 million people in the UK with a disability in the 2021/22 financial year. This represents 24% of the total population and covers a range of visible and hidden conditions, which can be either physical, neurological or mental.

Historically, people with disabilities have been excluded from society. The Mental Deficiency Act 1913 allowed for the forced institutionalisation of people with learning disabilities, categorising them as 'idiots', 'imbeciles', 'feeble-minded persons', and 'moral imbeciles'. Although shocking by today's standards, remnants of this language still persist colloquially.

Attitudes changed after World Wars I and II and the mistreatment of disabled individuals by the Nazis, leading to the emergence of organisations like Mencap and Scope. These organisations, originally named the National Association of Parents of Backward Children and the Spastic Society respectively, reflect the evolving attitudes towards disability and, with this, the language we use.

Social model of disability

The traditional medical model of disability focused on the problems of the disabled person and what they can and cannot do. In recent times, however, there has been a shift towards the social model of disability, which states that the exclusion that people with impairments encounter is caused by society and how it is organised, and that it is society that puts barriers in place that disable people.

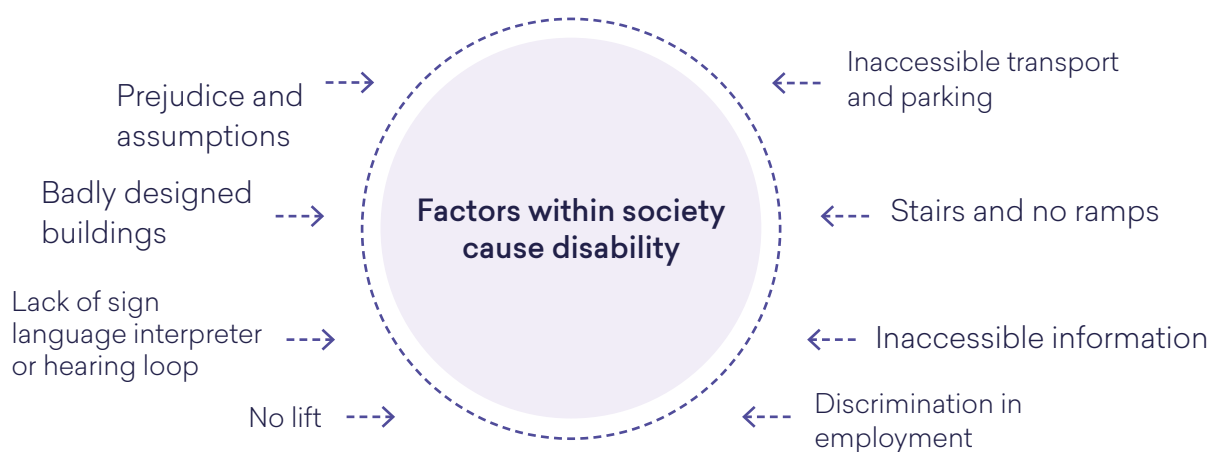


Medical Model of Disability



Language usually refers to a person's medical condition, what is 'wrong' with them and what they can and cannot do

Social Model of Disability



Language is focused around the barriers faced by an individual and what can be done to remove them

Helpful guidelines:

⊘ Avoid

- “Suffering from”
- “Suffers”
- “Is afflicted”
- “Is a victim of”
(these terms portray those with disabilities as “victims”)

-->

“Has (name of condition)”

- “Confined to a wheelchair”
- “Wheelchair bound”
- “Housebound”

-->

“Wheelchair user” (this term views the wheelchair as a mobility aid)

- “Cripple”
- “Invalid”

-->

“Disabled person”

- “Deaf and dumb”
- “Deaf mute”

-->

- “Deaf”
- “User of British Sign Language” (BSL)
- “Person with a hearing impairment”

“Able-bodied people”

-->

“Non-disabled people”

Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things, for example “blind drunk” or “paralytic” as these maintain negative stereotypes

-->

“Very drunk” / “extremely drunk”

- “Mentally handicapped”
- “Mentally defective”
- “Subnormal”
- “Backward”
- “Slow”

-->

“Learning disability”

“The blind”

-->

- “People with visual impairments”
- “Blind people”
- “Blind and partially sighted people”

“The disabled”

-->

“Disabled people”

✓ Instead, use

In short, use language that respects disabled people as active individuals who have control over their own lives. Speak directly to a disabled person and not to an interpreter or companion if they have one with them. Do not attempt to finish a sentence for the person you are talking to and do not patronise.

Respecting people's mental health through inclusive language

Mental health problems can be considered a disability under the Equality Act. However, because of a long history of stigmatisation and the recent focus on mental health, we wanted to cover it as a separate section in this guide.

For centuries, mental ill health has been heavily stigmatised on a global scale, leading to discrimination against individuals with mental health conditions. Only in recent years has there been an open dialogue about this issue and how it impacts people inside and outside of the workplace.

Given its significance, it is crucial for us to use inclusive language when speaking about mental health and avoid definitions that further exclude and stigmatise people with such problems.

Language around mental ill health is frequently changing, as is the language in other sections of this guide. "People with experience of mental and emotional distress" is a term that is suggested as more inclusive by The Mental Health Foundation. Its reasoning is that it focuses on the experience, rather than the implication of a 'problem'.

However, other terms – including "people with mental health problems" and "people with a mental illness" – are also common.



Helpful guidelines:

Avoid

- **Portraying those with mental health problems as “victims”**, for example not describing someone as “suffering from” or “suffers”.
- **Describing someone as “mental”, a “nutter” or a “lunatic”**. These phrases have been used in everyday language and serve to reinforce negative stereotypes.
- **Saying someone “has committed suicide”**. Instead, use more inclusive language for the bereaved family and friends such as “took their own life”, “ended their own life”, or “completed suicide”.
- **Stereotyping and everyday lingo that can be hurtful**. Commonly used blasé expressions that may be hurtful. For example, when something isn’t going to plan when something isn’t going to plan or when you are embarrassed, avoid saying “I’m going to kill myself”. This disregards the feelings of someone, or the family of someone, who is suicidal or ended their life.
- **Using the term “happy pills”**. Instead use “antidepressants”, “medication” or “prescription drugs”.
- **Describing someone thin as “anorexic”** as this undermines anorexia nervosa, which is a serious mental health condition.
- **Using words like “psycho” or “schizo”** to describe unwanted behaviour from others as this further stigmatises people living with schizophrenia and psychosis. Also, when describing a person with these conditions, a more inclusive term would be “a person who has experienced psychosis” or “a person who has schizophrenia”.
- **Saying “that’s depressing” to describe negative events** or describing yourself as being “depressed” when you’re feeling briefly down. This undermines depression as a serious mental health condition.
- **Casually using the word “OCD”** to describe you or others who are just clean and tidy. It undermines the symptoms of those living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.
- **Describing chaos as “bedlam”**. Saint Mary of Bethlehem, shortened over time to Bedlam, is the name given to an old hospital in London for the “mentally ill” and the use of this term perpetuates stigma.
- **Avoid describing mood swings as being “bipolar”**. Again, this undermines the symptoms of someone living with this serious condition.
- **Avoid the terms “mental patient”, “insane” or “mad”** or identifying someone as just a “service user”, “patient”, or a “schizophrenic”. These terms suggest that this is all the person is, and that they are defined by their diagnosis.

Instead...

- Treat people with experience of mental and emotional distress as individuals. People that have been impacted by mental ill health often struggle to recover their personal identity.
- Describe someone as ‘experiencing’ mental illness. This helps their identity. There are many positive recovery pathways available to benefit people who experience mental health problems therefore using expressions like “people who use mental health services”, “people who experience mental health problems”, and “people living with depression” ensures are language is inclusive and reflective of their experiences.

Where to access support

If you or someone in your team is concerned they may be developing a mental health problem, seek advice from your GP urgently.

If you are thinking about ending your life, please call 999 emergency services or go to your local hospital Accident and Emergency Department. They can contact your nearest crisis resolution team.

Below is a list of support organisations where you can find help.

Anxiety UK

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Run by people with anxiety to help others affected by anxiety disorders.

24-hour online chat (Ask Anxia) via their website.

Call the 24/7 self-care infoline on 03444 775 774.

Beat

beateatingdisorders.org.uk

National helpline to support those with eating disorders to get help.

Helpline open 3.00 pm until 8.00 pm, Monday to Friday.

Call 0808 8010677 (England), 0808 8010432 (Scotland), 0808 8010433 (Wales), 0808 8010434 (Northern Ireland) or email help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Mind

mind.org.uk

Information line offering advice about the different types of mental health problems and where to get help, and the different types of treatments and advocacy services available.

Call 0300 102 1234, 9.00 am to 6.00 pm, Monday to Friday (except bank holidays) or email info@mind.org.uk

Mind also offers a legal advice service for issues relating to mental capacity, human rights and discrimination. Call 0300 466 6463 or email legal@mind.org.uk

Papyrus

papyrus-uk.org

Support for children and young people under the age of 35 experiencing thoughts of suicide.

Advice line (HOPELINE247) open 24 hours a day, every day. Call 0800 0684141, text 88247 or email pat@papyrus-uk.org

The Papyrus website also offers resources around coping strategies, distraction techniques, conversation starters, and apps to support wellbeing.

Where to access support

SHOUT

giveusashout.org

Help with urgent issues such as abuse or assault, bullying, relationship challenges, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

24/7 crisis support text line – text Shout to 85258.

Samaritans

samaritans.org

Emotional support for anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide.

Confidential emotional support service available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Call freephone 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org

Samaritans also has a self-help app where you can track your mood, create a safety plan, try coping strategies, and keep track of helpful activities.



Social inclusion and language

The [World Bank](#) defines social inclusion as:

“the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society – improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity”.

The consequences of social exclusion can be significant, affecting both the excluded individuals and the cohesion of society as a whole.

People who live or grew up in an area with less resources can often be stigmatised simply because of this. The words used to describe an area or community can influence how the people that live there are viewed and how these people then view themselves. Language is one of the ways that we can maintain people’s dignity and prevent blame for the situation being apportioned to residents, either by others or themselves.

Employers could be missing opportunities to recruit, promote and retain some of the most talented and driven people due to the language used within an organisation.

Helpful guidelines:

Avoid

- “Disadvantaged”
- “Poor people”



“Hard to reach”



Instead, use

“Under resourced”

- “Communities with high-poverty rates”
- “Communities with access to fewer opportunities”

Intersectionality

When considering inclusive language, we also need to be mindful that the diversity characteristics for each individual will be different, and also that some individuals may have more than one characteristic.

Intersectionality is a social concept that recognises the diverse and fluid nature of the multiple characteristics an individual can hold, or identify with, such as gender, race, religion, professional status, marital status, socioeconomic status, etc.

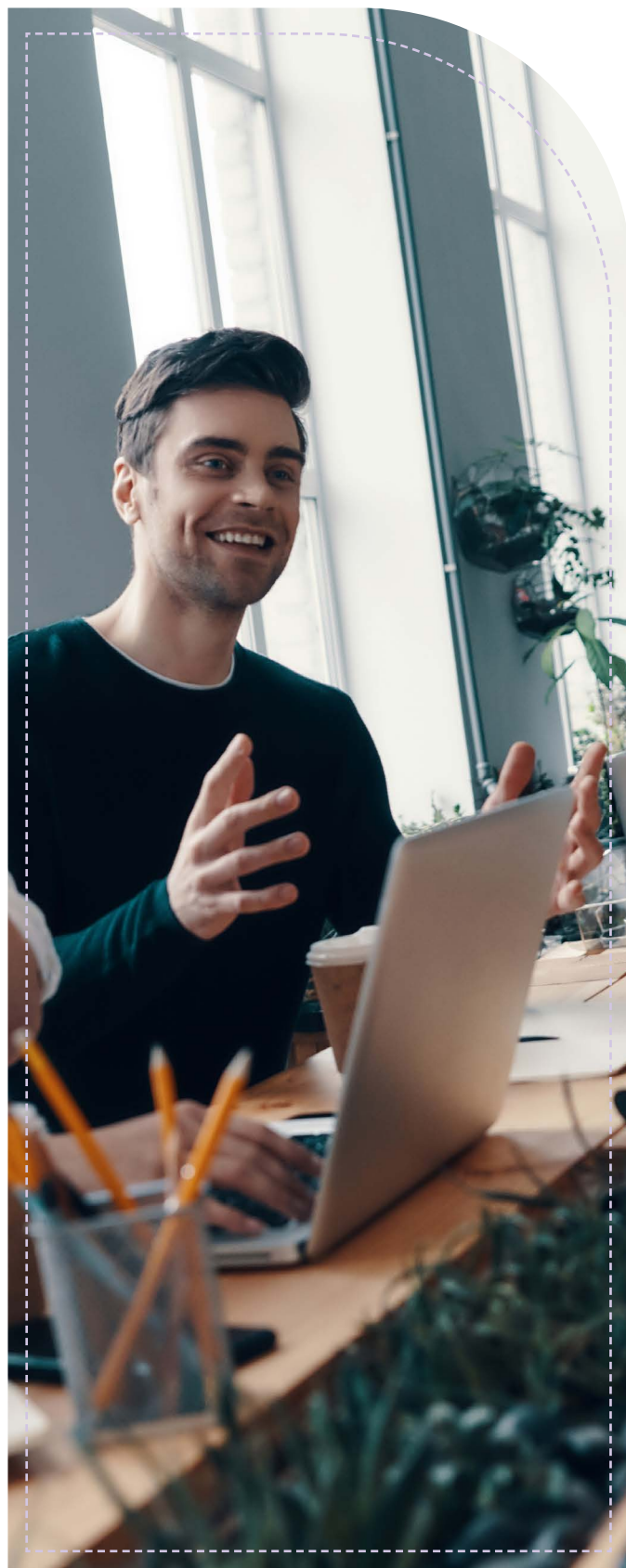
Individuals do not experience their diversity characteristics in isolation – they can overlap and collide to compound the experience of inequality. For example, someone may experience racism, sexism and ageism collectively or individually at different times and in different environments.

With this in mind, you need to **see the whole person**. For example:

- A Black gay man may have to deal with both racism and homophobia.
- An Asian woman who has a disability may have to deal with racism, sexism and ableism.

Having an intersectional identity often generates a feeling that someone does not completely belong in one group or another. They may even experience discrimination within these groups, for example a Black gay man may experience racism within the LGBTQ+ community and homophobia within the Black community.

This can lead to isolation, depression and other mental health issues.



Friendly reminders

The information provided in this guide is intended to serve as a general reference. However, when applying this guidance, it is important to keep in mind the following:

- **Language is constantly evolving.** For example, 'BAME' as an acronym is no longer used anymore.
- **Language preferences can vary across different sectors.** The language used in the NHS may differ from that used in the charity sector, and international organisations should consider words that may be offensive in other countries.
- **While inclusivity is crucial, it's important to avoid generalisations.** What may be offensive to one group of individuals may not be offensive to another. For instance, the term 'PoC' is commonly used in America, whereas 'Black people' is more frequently used in the UK.
- **Everyone has individual preferences.** If you're not sure about someone's preferred language and terminology, ask!



Need advice and support?

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are vital components of any successful team or organisation.

If you require any additional guidance or assistance, WorkNest offers a range of solutions to help you create an inclusive workplace, navigate the complexities of EDI, and minimise the risk of costly mistakes, including:

- **Specialist advice and support** on EDI matters from our team of [Employment Law and HR experts](#), including professionally drafted policies
- **Comprehensive training and team development services**, including our one-day [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion course](#) for managers and HR
- **Our powerful eLearning platform**, [LearningNest](#), where your team can access a wide range of modules covering various EDI subjects

To discuss your specific needs and see how we can support you, call 0345 226 8393 or visit www.worknest.com

Helpful resources

Inclusive language checkers:

Most Office Software applications now contain an Inclusiveness checker. To enable this feature, go to File > Options, then select 'Proofing' on the left menu. Ensure 'Mark grammar errors as you type' is enabled, then open the 'Grammar & Refinements' settings. Scroll down to the 'Inclusiveness' section and enable the options.

Age

Age UK: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/>

Acas: <https://www.acas.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/age-discrimination-key-points-for-the-workplace.pdf>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/age-discrimination>

Disability

Business Disability Forum: <https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/>

Acas: <https://www.acas.org.uk/disability-discrimination>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/disability-discrimination>

Gender reassignment

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/gender-reassignment-discrimination>

Marital status

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/marriage-and-civil-partnership-discrimination>

Mental health

Stampede Stigma: <https://www.stampedestigma.org/stop-stigma/language-guide>

Mind: <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/7582/mental-health-language.pdf>

Mental Health Foundation: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/why-language-we-use-describe-mental-health-matters>

Please refer to the mental health section of this guide for details of organisations that provide mental health support.

Other resources

Inclusive Employers: <https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/what-is-inclusive-language-how-to-use-it-in-the-workplace/>

Acas: <https://www.acas.org.uk/discrimination-bullying-and-harassment>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance>

Parents and pregnant people

Acas: <https://www.acas.org.uk/managing-your-employees-maternity-leave-and-pay/discrimination-because-of-pregnancy-and-maternity>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/equality/equality-act-2010/your-rights-under-equality-act-2010/pregnancy-and-maternity>

Race and ethnicity

Acas: <https://www.acas.org.uk/race-discrimination>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/race-discrimination>

Religion and belief

Acas: <https://www.acas.org.uk/religion-or-belief-discrimination>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/religion-or-belief-discrimination>

Sex and gender

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/sex-discrimination>

Sexual orientation

Stonewall: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/list-lgbtq-terms>

Equality and Human Rights Commission: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/sexual-orientation-discrimination>

Social inclusion

The World Bank: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/social-inclusion>

Social Mobility Commission: <https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/appendix/>



inclusion alliance

A huge thank you to the members of our own Inclusion Alliance for their invaluable contributions in shaping this guide. Their insights, feedback, and unwavering dedication to equality, diversity and inclusion have enriched this resource and reflect our shared commitment to creating a more inclusive workplace here at WorkNest.