



AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION

Inclusive language

A guide for APA members



australian.physio

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

A guide for APA members

Written by Dr Megan Ross, chair of the APA LGBTQIA+ advisory committee

The APA believes that all Australians deserve equal access to safe, high quality, equitable and evidence-based care. The APA is committed to developing and sustaining a diverse, inclusive and collaborative environment within and outside the organisation. We want to ensure that everyone feels respected and valued and that all presenters are practising the values of equity, diversity and inclusion. The APA seeks to create a vibrant and inclusive culture that allows respectful and stimulating conversations and learning opportunities. Ensuring that our language is always inclusive is one of the vital ways to demonstrate and practise diversity and inclusion.

What is inclusive language?

It is language that is respectful and accurate and that promotes acceptance and value of all. Inclusive language is free from words, phrases or tones that reflect or reinforce biased, prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views or words that trivialise, insult or exclude people based on their membership of a certain group or attributes. Using inclusive language puts the person first and avoids focusing on how society defines people based on characteristics. It is an easy way to facilitate respect and reciprocity and to enable safe, welcoming and meaningful conversations and interactions.

Language matters

It reflects the values and knowledge of the people using it and can reinforce positive and negative perceptions. It acknowledges the unique values, culture and experiences of individuals and groups and reflects diversity and intersecting characteristics, providing a more accurate view of people. It enables everyone to feel that they are being reflected in what is said or done.

Language is powerful

It can have a profound impact on individuals and groups of people. Inclusive language can make people feel included, empowered and valued. It creates a culture of mutual respect, dignity, inclusion, belonging and community and facilitates meaningful participation and interaction in a safe environment.

Language can be harmful

Consciously or unconsciously, language can reinforce harmful stereotypes, contribute to inequity, offend, intimidate, belittle and exclude. Derogatory or discriminatory language undervalues, denigrates, humiliates and perpetuates inequities in society. It shapes reality and can render people invisible.

Language is dynamic

Because language is constantly evolving, the meanings or connotations of words and terminology can change over time. It is our responsibility to continually adapt our language. The principles of inclusive language, however, do not change. As such, it is important to understand and apply the principles of inclusive language rather than learning specific phrases that may be appropriate at the current point in time. It is also best practice to have members of the community you are speaking about review your content.

Using inclusive language helps to avoid excluding or isolating people based on their age, cultural and linguistic diversity, disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. This guide will help you to use inclusive and avoid stigmatising language.

In an educational context, for example, we all have a responsibility to ensure that the diversity of our community is reflected and that all members are included. We also have a responsibility to ensure that what we do is not perceived as discriminatory, sexist, racist, homophobic or offensive.

When designing educational content, you should adhere to the following principles:

- ensure that materials accurately reflect the diversity of the audience and society (eg, in case studies or examples)
- highlight non-inclusive language when citing original sources by using [sic] to demonstrate that this is unacceptable
- avoid limiting the inclusion of people to only the area of their diversity
- consider whether personal attributes or characteristics are relevant to the context
- always ask if it's okay to use personal details about identity
- use language that puts people first

LANGUAGE TO AVOID	WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD:
Rural people	People in rural communities
LGBTQIA+ people	People who identify as LGBTQIA+
Whiplash participants	Participants who have experienced whiplash
Obese/overweight person	Person with obesity, person with BMI > XX

Note: identity-first language—some people may prefer identity-first language if they want to celebrate, claim or own their identity (or disability) as a core part of them. Different communities prefer person-first versus identity-first and it is important to reflect the language they use (eg, the deaf, blind and autistic communities are examples of communities that prefer and have collectively advocated for identity-first language because there is a culture that accompanies identity).



People are more than their gender identity, disability, condition or cultural heritage. Many people will use person-first language because they want to be seen as a person before their identity and it focuses on the dignity, strength and uniqueness of every individual instead of on their disease, condition or identity.

Avoid words that reinforce stigma or imply helplessness. Here are some suggestions:

LANGUAGE TO AVOID	WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD
Grouping people based on their condition or diagnosis or attaching it as a label, eg, DCDs, hypermobiles	Children with developmental coordination disorder, children who are hypermobile
Minority (this is 'othering', which views or treats a group of people as different in an alienating way or in a way that categorises them as inferior)	Use specific terms for the individual community or group (eg, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples)
Suffering/suffers from, victim of, afflicted by	Person who has/has experienced (removes victimising and passive language and the implication that the person is 'less than' or victimised)
Inspiring (when connected with disability) - this language implies that it is unusual for persons with disabilities to be successful or productive	Disability is part of life and human diversity, not something to be dramatised or sensationalised - this language implies that it is unusual for persons with disabilities to be successful or productive - it's patronising and should be avoided
Preferred pronouns, preferred name	Names and pronouns are what we call ourselves, not what we prefer to be called
Handicapped/disabled person	Person with a disability
Handicapped parking/bathroom	Accessible parking/bathroom (emphasises the importance of accessibility)
Wheelchair-bound	Uses a wheelchair, uses a mobility device (focuses on empowerment)
Able-bodied, normal	People without disabilities (removes negative framing around having a disability)
Mentally ill	Person with a mental health condition (removes stigma around mental health)
Addict/drug user/abuser, smokers, habit	Person with a substance use disorder or addiction (removes stigmatising or shaming/blaming language and keeps people first)
Special needs, high or low functioning (regarding cognitive, learning or developmental disorders)	Use the name of the medical diagnosis to accurately describe the condition (avoids dismissive or reductive language around social and cognitive abilities). Eg, neurodiverse (a person who has a learning disability or other sensory/emotional regulation condition such as autism, oppositional defiant disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or sensory processing disorder)
Disorder	Condition
The homeless	People experiencing homelessness (removes undue focus on the condition and puts the person first)

GENDER, SEX, SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Definitions

Gender: a social and cultural concept about identity, expression and experience as a person of a particular gender (man, woman, non-binary person, gender-fluid person, gender-diverse person).

Gender identity: one's own, internal, personal sense of being a girl/woman/female or a boy/man/male, as someone outside of that gender binary (nonbinary), or having no gender at all. It can correspond to, or be different from sex assigned at birth and may change over time.

Gender expression: how you express your gender through your clothing, behaviour and personal appearance.

Sex: assigned at birth and a construct based on biological sex characteristics/traits including chromosomes, hormones and sex organs (genitals).

Intersex: an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of innate bodily variations in sex characteristics (chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics).

People with intersex variations are born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical definitions for male or female bodies (including sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal patterns, and/or chromosome patterns) as defined by medical or society norms. Intersex traits include a wide range of different underlying variations, each with its own characteristics and differing degrees of expression.

Intersex people are a diverse population with many different intersex traits and other characteristics. Individual people with intersex variations use a variety of different terms, including being intersex, having an intersex variation or condition, having an innate variation of sex characteristics, or naming specific traits.

Sexual orientation: sexual identity, attraction and behaviour. Sexual orientation is an inherent or immutable and enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to/interest in others. It is not the same as, and is separate from and independent of, gender identity.

Heteronormativity: the assumption that heterosexuality is the preferred or norm for sexual orientation and sexual behaviour and privileges this over any other form of sexual orientation. It also refers to the societal pressure on everyone to look or act in a stereotypically heterosexual way. These assumptions are embedded in social and legal institutions that devalue, marginalise and discriminate against those who deviate from this 'norm'.

Cisnormativity: the assumption that cisgender is the norm and all people will identify with the binary gender they were assigned at birth. This implies that only those whose identities and behaviours that align with cisgender identities are valid and erases the existence of trans and nonbinary people.

'Trans broken arm syndrome': incorrectly attributing health conditions to a person being trans.

Pathologising or medicalising language: this can cause harm, eg, 'disorder of sex development' (an obsolete term for intersex variations) or 'gender identity disorder' (an obsolete term for gender dysphoria).

Intersectionality: the way in which different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Provides a framework for understanding how social meanings related to the way we categorise and identity can overlap, creating different layers and types of discrimination or disadvantage for individuals or groups. Categories include gender, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, race, ethnicity, language, faith, class, socio-economic status, ability and age.

Inclusive language

A guide for APA members

Identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ communities is only one part of any person or community. Intersectionality describes how different parts of a person's identity or circumstances (eg, age, race, culture, disability, gender, location or religion) intersect and combine to shape people's life experiences, including experiences of discrimination.

When you communicate about people who are LGBTQIA+ it is important to recognise and leave space for human complexity, intersectionality and diversity.

Terminology for LGBTQIA+ communities is constantly evolving, deeply personalised and individualised. As such, rather than learning a static list of definitions for terms, it is best to learn how to use broadly inclusive language and also to tailor communication based on insights from the community. In fact, someone's gender identity may shift or change over time and may not be assigned to one specific gender at all. Using gender-neutral language is a way to be inclusive of all gender identities.

When you are referring to a specific individual and they have shared their pronouns or that they are trans, gender-fluid, non-binary, brotherboy or sistergirl, be sensitive to using their stated name, pronouns and gender. It is discrimination to misgender or deadname someone (ie, use their gender or name assigned at birth when they have explicitly indicated their name and pronouns).



Gender-specific terms should be avoided. Here are some suggestions:

LANGUAGE TO AVOID	WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD
LGBTQIA+ people	People with LGBTQIA+ identities and/or experiences
Transsexual (outdated and offensive)	Transgender
Sex-change operation	Gender-affirming surgery
Biologically, genetically or born male/female	Presumed male/female at birth
Wife, husband, brother, sister	Partner, spouse, sibling
Nouns that typically start or end in man/woman (eg, mankind, policeman, chairman)	Use human/person or another gender-neutral term instead as people of all genders can do these jobs (eg, humankind, police officer, chairperson)
Male/female genitalia	Body parts don't have gender; use anatomical terms (penis/vagina)
Screening among men/women	Screening among people or screening among high-risk individuals is more gender-inclusive.
Gendered greetings such as ladies and gentlemen	Non-gendered terms (eg, folks, friends)

Also avoid using terms such as 'lifestyle' or 'preference' that frame gender and sexual orientation as a choice as opposed to an orientation/identity.

Never make assumptions about a person's gender identity, sexual orientation or sex characteristics

- Assumptions about gender identity, sexual orientation and sex characteristics can be harmful.
- Avoid making assumptions about people based on their appearance, or cultural norms or stereotypes.
- Avoiding assumptions includes asking people how they wish to be addressed, what their pronouns are and using gender neutral terms until you are aware of their identities or experiences.
- Accept and respect how people define their gender and sexual orientation and mirror the language they use in conversation.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Amnesty International Australia, Inclusive Language and Events Guide
[amnesty.org.au/inclusive-language-and-events-guide](https://www.amnesty.org.au/inclusive-language-and-events-guide)

Diversity Council Australia, Words at Work: Building Inclusion through the Power of Language
[dca.org.au/research/wordsatwork-building-inclusion-through-power-language](https://www.dca.org.au/research/wordsatwork-building-inclusion-through-power-language)

The University of Queensland, UQ Guide to Inclusive Language
staff.uq.edu.au/files/242/using-inclusive-language-guide.pdf

Australian Human Rights Commission, LGBTI Terminology
[humanrights.gov.au/our-work/lgbti/terminology](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/lgbti/terminology)

Australian Institute of Family Studies, LGBTIQ+ glossary of common terms
[aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/lgbtiq-communities](https://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/lgbtiq-communities)

Intersex Human Rights Australia
[ihra.org.au/style](https://www.ihra.org.au/style)

Australian Bureau of Statistics, Standard for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables
[abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/standard-sex-gender-variations-sex-characteristics-and-sexual-orientation-variables/latest-release](https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/standard-sex-gender-variations-sex-characteristics-and-sexual-orientation-variables/latest-release)

American Cancer Society, Inclusive Language and Writing Guide Second Edition
[cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/online-documents/en/pdf/flyers/health_equity_inclusive_language_writing_guide.pdf](https://www.cancer.org/content/dam/cancer-org/online-documents/en/pdf/flyers/health_equity_inclusive_language_writing_guide.pdf)



AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION

Level 1, 1175 Toorak Rd
Camberwell
Victoria 3124

p: +61 3 9092 0888

e: info@australian.physio

w: australian.physio

