Sinneave's Preferred Approach to Neuro-affirming Language

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Inclusive and neuro-affirming language reflects mindfulness and intentionality—it is a dynamic space that continues to evolve. By asking and listening, we continue to inform our use of language in all aspects of our work and are learning the considerations and preferences of Autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

This document provides current general practices and a lens into how to respectfully communicate about autism and neurodivergence in written documents, information shared online, in presentations, as well as when communicating in person. It is important to note that what is considered potentially offensive language depends on the time, place, manner, and the preferences of the individuals with whom you are communicating. Thus, please consider all relevant details when choosing specific terms to use. **Whenever possible, the best option is to ask the person/ people you are speaking to what their preferences are.**

Note to reader:

If your experience is/has been different from what is expressed in this document, please share your feedback with Sinneave's Communications and Marketing department by emailing info@sinneavefoundation.org.

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Terminology

Term	Definition
Ableism	Discrimination of disabled people based on the belief that "typical" abilities are superior.
Agency	Control over one's own actions and their consequences.
Autonomy	Being able to act on your own values and interests; self-governance.
Behavioural Control	Managing someone else's (or your own, depending on context) behaviour or activities; removing autonomy.
Infantilize	Treating someone as a child or in a way which denies their maturity in age or experience.
Medicalization	The process by which things come to be considered as medical conditions, or things to fix, treat, or cure.
Normalization	The process through which ideas and behaviours that may fall outside of social norms come to be regarded as "normal".
Othering	Viewing or treating someone as different from yourself and/or most people.
Presuming Competence	Belief that someone has potential to develop their thinking, learning, and understanding; assuming someone has the same capacity of knowledge and capability as you do.
Stigmatization	The action of describing or regarding someone as worthy of disgrace or great disapproval.

Nine (9) Questions You Can Ask Yourself About Your Written Work

1. Would I use this language if I were in a conversation with an Autistic person?

2. Does my language suggest that Autistic people are inherently inferior to non-autistic people, or assert that they lack something fundamental to being human?

3. Does my language suggest that autism is something to be fixed, cured, controlled, or avoided?

4. Does my language unnecessarily medicalize autism when describing supports?

5. Does my language suggest to people that the goal of a service is behavioural control and normalization, rather than granting as much autonomy and agency to Autistic people as possible?

6. Am I using particular words or phrases solely because it is a tradition, even though Autistic people have expressed that such language can be stigmatizing?

7. Does my language unnecessarily "other" people, by suggesting the characteristics of autism bear no relationships to characteristics of non-autistic people?

8. Does my language presume competency (i.e., not over-explaining something, assume the person knows what I am discussing)?

9. Am I using the same tone and pitch I would be using when conversing with a non-autistic (non-infantilizing or, in other words, not talking down to someone or talking to them like you would talk to a pet or toddler)?

Respectful Language Guide

Potentially Offensive Language	Preferred Language	Rationale (Why it is Preferred)	Example of Preferred Language
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	**Autistic, on the spectrum**	It avoids negative connotations associated with the word 'disorder'	"They have four Autistic students in their class."
Autistic (Lowercase "a")	**Autistic (capital "A"), do not capitalize 'non-autistic'**	Capitalizing the word Autistic acknowledges the unique culture and community surrounding Autistic folks. This is similar reasoning for capitalizing the word "Black" and "Deaf"	"They are Autistic."
Neurodiverse	**Neurodivergent**	Neurodiverse refers to the general diversity seen across all people. Neurodivergent refers to a specific individual or group (e.g., Autistics) with a particular variation of diversity	"An Autistic person is considered to be, and many prefer to be called, neurodivergent. Other examples of neurodivergence include ADHD, stuttering, and generalized anxiety."

Potentially Offensive Language	Preferred Language	Rationale (Why it is Preferred)	Example of Preferred Language
Person-first language (person with autism)	**Identity-first language (Autistic)**	Identity first language reflects the belief that being Autistic is a core part of a person's identity	"They are Autistic." "Autistic employees."
Executive Dysfunction	**Executive functioning**	It avoids negative connotations associated with the word 'dysfunction'	"They use detailed lists to support their executive functioning."
Autism symptoms or impairments	**Specific Autistic experiences, features, or characteristics**	It avoids medical terminology that pathologizes the characteristics and experiences of Autistic people as deficient and abnormal	"Autism/Autistic characteristics" or specify the specific feature you are discussing. For example, "Some Autistic people find reducing eye contact with someone increases their ability to process language." or "Some Autistic people find reduced eye contact to be more comfortable."

Potentially Offensive Language	Preferred Language	Rationale (Why it is Preferred)	Example of Preferred Language
At risk of autism	**May be Autistic; increased likelihood of being Autistic**	It avoids danger-oriented terms and avoids negative notions of autism	"Because the family already has one Autistic child, the second born child is more likely to also be Autistic."
Co-morbidity	**Co-occurring**	Avoid using medical terminology; it shows that autism is not a disease	"Autistics have higher rates of co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, and depression than non-autistic individuals."
Cure, treatment, prevention	**Specific supports and services**	It helps show that autism does not need to be cured, treated, or modified	"There are supports for the specific issue you are dealing with."
Autism is a disease/illness	**Autism is a neurological difference or disability**	This preferred term allows for the inclusion of positive characteristics as part of the core definition of autism	"Autism is simply a difference in how the brain processes information; and this difference influences how autistic people think and interact with others."

Potentially Offensive Language	Preferred Language	Rationale (Why it is Preferred)	Example of Preferred Language
Special interests	**Focused, intense, or passionate interests**	Shows that everyone has interests, not just Autistic people, so they do not need to be characterized as "special"	"One of Shane's focused interests is bikes. He has extensive knowledge about all things bike related. He rides bikes and talks about bikes whenever the opportunity presents itself."
Nonverbal	**Non-speaking**	It shows that just because you do not speak does not mean that you do not communicate in other ways; non-speaking Autistic individuals still communicate	"An Autistic individual can be minimally speaking, or non-speaking, and be able to understand and communicate with you."
Special needs	**Specific descriptions of Autistic people's needs**	Shows that everyone has needs, not just Autistic people, so they do not need to be characterized as 'special'	"Crystal has not yet learned how to cross the street safely. Until then, she requires support when walking across the street."

Potentially Offensive Language	Preferred Language	Rationale (Why it is Preferred)	Example of Preferred Language
Challenging behaviour / disruptive behaviour / problem behaviour	**Meltdown (for uncontrollable behaviour), stimming (when relevant), or a specific description of the behaviour (e.g., injurious or aggressive behaviour)**	It is important not to pose behaviours such as stimming as a problem or as disruptive. In using the preferred language, one can avoid medicalizing autism as something that needs to be fixed	"Norm may use self-injurious behavior or become aggressive toward others when he is in distress."
"Prefers to __" *when not explicitly stated	**Tends to ___** **May ___** **Sometimes (or often) ____**	Using the term "tends to" as an alternative to "prefers to" focuses on observed behaviour and leaves room to understand why that may be; avoids assumptions	"Bob tends to stay inside". "Randall often stays inside."
Autistic traits *when used for distinguishable and uncorrelated characteristics	**The specific trait**	It is important to use the name of a specific trait rather than referring to it as an "Autistic trait" when characteristics extend into the general non-autistic population as well	"My daughter Jillian is Autistic, and my daughter Amy is non-autistic. They are both very outgoing."

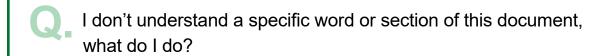| Potentially Offensive Language	Preferred Language	Rationale (Why it is Preferred)	Example of Preferred Language
Functioning labels: "high-functioning" and "low-functioning" and severity: "mild", "moderate", "severe"	**The specific needs of the specific Autistic person**	It is important not to use functioning labels, as they medicalize autism and portray the spectrum as linear	"Emma requires 24-hour aide support."
Suffers from, affected by, impacted by	**Autistic, Autistic person**	It is important not to use language that connotes pity or shame	"Yolan is Autistic."
Cases/patients	**Autistic, Autistic person**	It is important to use humanizing language	"There are eight Autistic people signed up for the workshop."
Red flag, warning sign	**Possible indicators**	It is important to use language that does not position autism as a burden or something to be feared	"Mike's sensitivity to certain sounds is a possible indicator of autism."

Summary Checklist for Neuro-affirming Language:

- ❑ I used "Autistic" instead of "Autism Spectrum Disorder".

- ❑ I capitalized the "A" in "Autistic", and not in "non-autistic".

- ❑ I used "neurodivergent" instead of "neurodiverse".

- ❑ I used identity-first language unless requested otherwise.

- ❑ I used specific features and characteristics instead of "autism symptoms" or "autism impairments".

- ❑ I used "may be Autistic" instead of "at risk of autism".

- ❑ I used "co-occurring" instead of "co-morbidity".

- ❑ I used "autism is a neurological difference" instead of "autism is a disease/illness".

- ❑ I used "focused interests" instead of "special interests".

- ❑ I used "non-speaking" instead of "nonverbal".

- ❑ I specified the Autistic's needs instead of saying "special needs", "high-functioning", or "low-functioning".

- ❑ I used a description of behaviour instead of saying "challenging", "disruptive", or "problem" behaviour.

- ❑ I used "tends to ___" "often ___." "may ___." or "sometimes ____." when not told explicitly someone prefers to do something.

- ❑ I referred to characteristics that extend to the general non-autistic population as the specific trait rather than "Autistic traits" (i.e., Instead of saying "an Autistic trait" say "shyness" as it applies to non-autistics as well).

- ❑ I used an appropriate (non-infantilising) tone.

- ❑ I used "Autistic" instead of "suffers from", "affected by", or "impacted by".

- ❑ I used humanizing language (e.g. person, individual, people) avoiding phrases and words such as: "cases", "patients", "red flag", "warning sign".

- ❑ I used "executive functioning" over "executive dysfunction".

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

Q. I don't understand a specific word or section of this document, what do I do?

A. Email your questions to Sinneave's Communications and Marketing Office at info@sinneavefoundation.org

Q. Should I always use these terms, such as identity-first language?

A. You should always use the preference of the Autistic individual(s) you are working with. The ones listed in the Respectful Language Guide above can be used as a default.