



AUTISM CANADA

WORDS MATTER



A COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION GUIDE IN THE AUTISM FIELD

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A collaborative language and communication guide in the autism field

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REFERENCE: DR. NICK WALKER'S NOTES ON NEURODIVERSITY, AUTISM, & SELF-LIBERATION
Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions: SEPTEMBER 27, 2014:
<https://neurocosmopolitanism.com/>

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COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE AUTISM FIELD

Autism Canada is a national organization that dedicates itself to facilitating collaboration between the many groups involved, both personally and professionally, in the conversation on autism, all of which have their own perspectives and their own ways of talking about autism. The complexity of this conversation and the diversity of the groups concerned means that dialogue can be difficult at times, and the importance of said dialogue requires that we recognize both a need for clarity and a need for sensitivity to each other's perspectives. In this vein, it is necessary to create a shared language that will ensure a productive, positive discourse, respectful of all relevant parties. It is here that we should explain the principles by which we have chosen this language, principles of nuance, humanization, and empathy.

Autism is a complex issue — one that intersects with many other complicated issues such as health and wellbeing, education and employment, acceptance, and identity. It is therefore important not to fall prey to hyper-simplistic narratives about autism, both positive and negative. Seeing efforts to understand autism and improve the lives of people living with autism as a “war on autism” frames autism as an enemy, rather than what it is for many people who live with it — a part of their lives, a part of their families, sometimes a blessing, sometimes a trial, but ultimately part of who they are and how they live. At the same time, many people on the Autism Spectrum do struggle in their day-to-day lives, and this should not be ignored or neglected from our understanding of autism. It is important to acknowledge both the variability of autism and the complexity of our relationships with it.

It is likewise important to recognize the context in which we speak. While there has been a great deal of debate over ‘person-first’ and ‘condition-first’ terms like ‘adult with autism’ and ‘spectrum adult’, what is ultimately important is that the person is acknowledged. An autistic person, speaking in the first-person, might simply say, “I am autistic,” given that their personhood is self-evident. Similarly, medical terminology such as developmental disability, disorder, and comorbidity, while entirely appropriate within the context of medicine and medical research, is often misused or carries stigmatizing connotations in popular usage. We therefore request that such terms be deemphasized when communicating with a more general audience. It would be premature to say that there is an obvious answer on how to express the idea of nonautistic neurology as one type of human experience rather than the default. Language is a living thing, built and rebuilt by the consensus and the consent of its speakers, and we fully expect the conversation on how to create an inclusive, mutually beneficial dialect to continue into the future.

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WORDS MATTER: LANGUAGE DOES PLAY A LARGE ROLE IN SHAPING SOCIETAL ATTITUDES.

Words and language are powerful tools by which an individual can express ideas, whether abstract, actionable, or concrete. Language and the meanings we attach to words very much impact, influence, develop, and change the attitudes that we have toward the subjects of discussion. Changing a phrase - even if it holds the same literal meaning -- alters the subtle connotations and nuances of the speech and communicates a different meaning and context than the original phrasing.

The theory behind person-first language is that it puts the person before the disability or the condition and emphasizes the value and worth of the individual by recognizing them as a person instead of a condition.

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<i>Undesirable Language</i>	<i>Preferred Language</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
<p>Recovery, heal, fix, cure, suffers from autism, incurable, disease</p>	<p>Improving quality of life; Improving social integration; Addressing health concerns; Accessing support; Lifelong condition</p>	<p>One fixes that which is broken. One heals that which is sick. This kind of language makes sense when talking about a broken bone or a disease, but not when talking about a complex condition whose 'treatment' predominantly involves teaching skills, removing barriers, providing opportunities, and addressing secondary health concerns.</p>
<p>Suffers from autism, has autism</p>	<p>Is on the Autism Spectrum</p>	<p>To say that one 'suffers' from autism or "has autism" is to assume, one that forwards a narrative that autism is necessarily a negative part of a person's life. A more neutral term is preferred.</p>
<p>Nothing can be done, there is nothing you can do.</p>	<p>There are supports available, there are options, improving independence, improving health</p>	<p>Rare is the circumstance in which truly nothing may be done, where no better outcome can be pursued. Supports for people with autism and their families have improved over the past several decades.</p>

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<i>Undesirable Language</i>	<i>Preferred Language</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
<p>War on autism, eliminate, eradicate, etc.</p>	<p>Improving outcomes; Accommodate ones environment; Helping families and individuals by eliminating barriers</p>	<p>The social model of disability states that a person’s activities are limited not by the impairment or condition but by environment and barriers and are consequences of a lack of social organization.</p>
<p>Slow, simple, “special”, low functioning, disabled, abnormal.</p>	<p>Thinks/understands differently; Neurodivergent, Unique perspective; Individual on the Autism Spectrum</p>	<p>Euphemisms like ‘slow’ and ‘simple’ are inaccurate. There are several forms of intelligence and we should not base our opinions of intelligence on a person’s capacity for communication and social interactions. Further, it is usually better to focus on autism as a difference rather than a deficiency. To some individuals on the spectrum, functioning labels are perceived as inappropriate.</p>
<p>Can’t communicate, mute, suffers from mutism.</p>	<p>Uses a device to speak; Is unable to communicate verbally; Non-verbal, Non-speaking</p>	<p>Communication is not limited to the spoken word. Body language, sign language, and written/typed language are all ways to exchange information.</p>

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<i>Undesirable Language</i>	<i>Preferred Language</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
<p>"What's your hidden talent?", "Are you a genius?", "What is your superpower?"</p>	<p>"What brings you comfort?" "What brings you joy?"</p>	<p>Not every individual on the spectrum is a savant, but everyone has something they're interested in.</p> <p>The reason some may become savant-like about something is because those things bring great joy and comfort.</p>
<p>Normal looking, not autistic looking, doesn't seem autistic, "You don't look autistic".</p>	<p>"Is there anything I should know to make things easier for you?" "How can I help?"</p>	<p>There is no one way to be autistic, and statements like "You don't look autistic" can undermine and delegitimize people with autism by implicitly questioning their identity and whether they deserve the supports they receive for their condition.</p>
<p>Unacceptable behaviour, "Behave yourself", "Control your child", "What is wrong with your child?"</p>	<p>"I don't know what you're trying to tell me, could you explain?" "Do you need help?"</p> <p>Be patient and non-judgemental.</p>	<p>What we sometimes call 'disruptive' behaviour is often a way of expressing stress, pain, or excitement — or a way of coping with a stressful situation. Empathy is always preferable to judgement.</p>

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<i>Undesirable Language</i>	<i>Preferred Language</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Co-morbidity (unless used in medical or diagnostic context)	Co-occurring or dual diagnosis	Co-morbidity is entirely correct as a technical term. However, to the general population a word containing 'morbid' carries the connotation of something scary or potentially fatal. Co-occurring is a good plain-language equivalent.
Developmentally delayed, neurodevelopmental challenges, neurological disorder (unless used in medical or diagnostic context)	Neurodivergent, on the Autism Spectrum, on the spectrum	Long, complex strings of medical terminology always sound incredibly serious and solemn and don't necessarily communicate the right tone, even if they are technically medically accurate.

Clarity of Language

<i>Terminology</i>	<i>Example of Correct Usage</i>	<i>Incorrect Usage</i>
NEURODIVERSE: A group of people is neurodiverse if one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning.	"We humans are a neurodiverse species." "The students in this classroom are neurodiverse."	"This group welcomes individuals on the spectrum and other neurodiverse people."

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<i>Terminology</i>	<i>Example of Correct Usage</i>	<i>Incorrect Usage</i>
<p>Or, to phrase it another way, a neurodiverse group is a group in which multiple neurocognitive styles are represented.</p>		<p>There is no such thing as a “neurodiverse person.” the correct phrase here would be “This group is open to both neurotypicals and the neurodiverse.”</p>
<p>NEURODIVERSITY: The diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.</p>	<p>“Our school offers multiple learning strategies to accommodate the neurodiversity of our student body.”</p>	<p>“My neurodiversity makes it hard for me to cope with school.” “The correct word here would be neurodivergence, rather than neurodiversity. Groups are diverse; individuals diverge.</p>
<p>NEURODIVERGENT, or ND: Sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverges significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”</p>	<p>“Our school aims to be inclusive of students who are on the Autism Spectrum, dyslexic, or otherwise neurodivergent, though there are some types of neurodivergence that we’re still seeking ways to accommodate.”</p> <p>Or</p> <p>This Facebook group is for people who are both ND (neurodivergent) and part of the LGBTQ+ community.</p>	<p>“This group welcomes individuals on the spectrum, and other neurodiverse people.”</p> <p>There’s no such thing as a “neurodiverse person.” the correct phrase here would be “This group welcomes individuals on the spectrum, LGBTQ+ community and other neurodivergent people.”</p>

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Clarity of Language

<i>Terminology</i>	<i>Example of Correct Usage</i>	<i>Incorrect Usage</i>
<p>NEURODIVERGENCE: (the state of being neurodivergent) can be largely or entirely genetic. It can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two (autism and dyslexia are examples of innate forms of neurodivergence)</p>		
<p>NEUROTYPICAL, or NT: Often abbreviated as NT, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.” Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent, not the opposite of autistic. Autism is only one of many forms of neurodivergence, so there are many people who are neither neurotypical nor autistic.</p>	<p>“My sister is neurotypical, but after growing up with a parent and brother on the spectrum, she’s quite at ease with other people’s neurodivergence.”</p>	<p>“Is your daughter autistic or neurotypical?”</p>

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Clarity of Language

Clarity of language supports clarity of understanding.

NEURODIVERSITY

What It Means:

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

What It Doesn't Mean:

Neurodiversity is a biological fact. It's not a perspective, an approach, a belief, a political position, or a paradigm. It is not neurodiversity itself.

Neurodiversity is not a trait that any individual possesses. Diversity is a trait possessed by a group, not an individual. When an individual diverges from the dominant societal standards of "normal" neurocognitive functioning, they don't "have neurodiversity," they're neurodivergent (see below).

Example of Correct Usage:

"Our school offers multiple learning strategies to accommodate the neurodiversity of our student body."

Examples of Incorrect Usage:

"My neurodiversity makes it hard for me to cope with school."

The correct word here would be neurodivergence, rather than neurodiversity. Groups are diverse; individuals diverge.

NEURODIVERGENT, or ND (and NEURODIVERGENCE)

What It Means:

Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of "normal."

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Clarity of Language

Neurodivergence (the state of being neurodivergent) can be largely or entirely genetic. It can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two (autism and dyslexia are examples of innate forms of neurodivergence).

Examples of Correct Usage:

“Our school aims to be inclusive of students who are autistic, dyslexic, or otherwise neurodivergent, though there are some types of neurodivergence that we’re still seeking ways to accommodate.”

Or

“This Facebook group is for people who identify as both queer and ND (neurodivergent).”

Examples of Incorrect Usage:

“This group welcomes people on the autism spectrum and other neurodiverse people.”

There is no such thing as a “neurodiverse person.” The correct phrase here would be “This group welcomes people on the autism spectrum and other neurodivergent people.”

NEUROTYPICAL, or NT

What It Means:

Neurotypical, often abbreviated as NT, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurotypical can be used as either an adjective (“He’s neurotypical”) or a noun (“He’s a neurotypical”). Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent. Neurotypicality is the condition from which neurodivergent people diverge.

What It Doesn’t Mean:

Neurotypical is not synonymous with non-autistic.

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Clarity of Language

Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent, not the opposite of autistic. Autism is only one of many forms of neurodivergence, so there are many people who are neither neurotypical nor autistic.

Examples of Correct Usage:

“My friend is NT, but after growing up with a parent and brother on the spectrum, she’s quite at ease with other people’s neurodivergence.”

Example of Incorrect Usage:

“Is your daughter autistic or neurotypical?”

This isn’t a well-worded question because there are other possibilities. The daughter in question might be non-autistic but might also not qualify as neurotypical – she might, for instance, be dyslexic or have Down Syndrome.

NEURODIVERSE

What It Means:

A group of people is neurodiverse if one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning. Or, to phrase it another way, a neurodiverse group is a group in which multiple neurocognitive styles are represented.

A family, the faculty or student body of a school, the population of a town, or the cast of characters of a TV show would be neurodiverse. If some members had different neurocognitive styles from other members – for instance, if some members were neurotypical while others were individuals on the spectrum.

What It Doesn’t Mean:

Many people mistakenly use neurodiverse where the correct word would be neurodivergent. The incorrect use of neurodiverse to mean neurodivergent is by far the most common.

There is no such thing as a “neurodiverse individual.” The correct term is “neurodivergent individual.”

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Clarity of Language

An individual can diverge, but an individual cannot be diverse. Diversity is a property of groups, not of individuals. That's intrinsic to the meaning and proper usage of the term diverse. Groups are diverse; individuals diverge.

In addition, neurodiverse does not mean "non-neurotypical." The opposite of neurotypical is neurodivergent, not neurodiverse.

Humanity is neurodiverse, just as humanity is racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. By definition, no human being falls outside of the spectrum of human neurodiversity, just as no human being falls outside of the spectrum of human racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

Examples of Correct Usage:

"This group is open to both neurotypicals and the neurodivergent."

"We humans are a neurodiverse species."

"The students in this classroom are neurodiverse."

"My neurodiverse family includes three neurotypicals, two on the spectrum, and one person who's both bipolar and dyslexic."

Examples of Incorrect Usage:

"This group welcomes individuals on the spectrum and other neurodiverse people." There is no such thing as a "neurodiverse person." the correct phrase here would be ". individuals on the spectrum and other neurodivergent people."

"This group is open to both neurotypicals and the neurodiverse."