

Language is an expression of who we are as individuals and a tool for connection. It can heal as well as harm. When chosen deliberately and with thoughtfulness, using inclusive and caring terms and pronouns is possible. The goal of an inclusive language policy is to make sure that the people in your organization feel included and cared about. That means your potential clients and customers, your staff and colleagues, and other humans you may interact with. People differ in how they experience being in a body. They have preferences for terms used to describe their body parts. People also have differences in their sense of gender, which is a part of language. Some people have a very strong feeling one way or another, some people experience both, some neither, and for others it depends on the day. The question becomes, “With so much diversity in humanity, how can you be inclusive 100% of the time?”

1. Show respect.

If you are uncertain about pronouns or the terms people use for their body parts, ask. Let them know your intention is to show respect. “I want to make sure you feel respected. How can I pronounce your name correctly? What pronouns do you prefer? What terms do you use for birthing and feeding your baby?”

Apologize quickly when you get it wrong or slip, but don’t dwell on it. Mostly people want to get through the conversation, not hear your excuses.

2. Pronouns – a different thought.

When you don’t want to “gender” people, use the universal “they”. “They” can be anyone, a “him” or a “her” or any human. I started using universal “they” in my writing about twelve years ago. At first it was an adjustment for people, but now it seems quite normal. It took a bit longer to use “they” when speaking in a conversation instead of “him” or “her”, but once again its now easy. I rarely slip into a gendered pronoun for anyone.

3. Gendering

Is “gendering” people ever appropriate? “Gendering” means assigning a gender to a person based on their appearance without knowing whether its accurate or not. It also means that your language is reaffirming a binary existence, an either/or to gender, such as male or female.

In some social settings, you will stand out by not following the social norm. People may feel disrespected when called “they”, especially people who prefer “her”. “Him’s” don’t seem to get as excited about being referred to as “they”, while femmes may see “they” as masculinizing or disempowering.

I go back to the idea that you want to affirm people as they see themselves. By insisting on non-gendered pronouns you may be doing the opposite of what is intended: making people feel included and cared about.

4. Descriptive language

This requires active engagement. Think, “Who am I referring to in what I am saying? What kind of response do I want to get?” Then use the right kind of term.

People will tell you that “birthing person” refers to all people who are in the act of birthing a baby. However, people who identify as “mothers” may not see themselves as a “birthing person”. Birthing person works as a term because it has no emotional connotations; it describes

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what it is without emotion. Whereas, if I asked you to take two minutes to make a list of terms associated with the word “mother”, you’d have no problem filling the time. Many of the written terms would invoke feelings. Therefore, knowing the result you want to obtain makes choosing terminology easier.

It's important to point out that women and mothers have a long history of being denied power, especially over their own bodies. Many people today are fighting for rights over their own bodies in childbirth. To take away the identification of femaleness and potentially erase the role of mother in birthing a child can be offensive.

Therefore, when I am talking about people in the act of birthing, I'll say that. “People who are birthing their babies don't have the energy to counter negative comments”. Hence when I am talking about “birthing people and mothers”, that's what I say, “birthing people and mothers”. “Many birthing people and mothers have found that the companionship of a loved one makes all the difference in labor coping.” That terminology doesn't exclude or invalidate people who don't identify as “mothers”.

When I am talking about a health condition that involves a cervix, I'll say, “People who have cervixes need to be careful about HPV prevention because of the late in life possibility of cancer.” That isn't about “mothers” or even “women”, but anyone who has a cervix. The concern with this terminology is that it can seem like you are omitting the thinking part of a person. That's the problem with “people with uteruses who get pregnant”. The most important part of the statement is the uterus, and not the whole person. Once again, being sensitive to your audience and consciously choosing terms is key.

In summary, the rules for being inclusive in your language are to be respectful, be kind, and know your audience. Think before you speak about what your message is and choose your terms accordingly.

5. When You Have Caused Harm and Injury

None of us are perfect. Despite our best intentions we may fall short of expectations. First, make sure you have offended. It feels much better to be vulnerable and mend any injury in the moment, than to wonder if something went wrong, not ask and not know.

Listen. Don't make excuses or explain.

Take responsibility and apologize for the impact of what you did do. If the response you receive seems out of proportion to what happened, recognize that past trauma might have been triggered. Breathe into your belly and acknowledge their feelings. Often, they have not been allowed to be seen and your openness is allowing it to bubble up so it can be healed.

Acknowledging feelings is different than accepting blame or responsibility that doesn't belong to you.

You do not need to explain that you didn't mean it. Everyone knows that already – you are a good person who made a mistake. Acknowledge the harm, apologize, and don't dwell on yourself in this conversation. Deal with your own feelings later with your colleagues or friends.

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Good communication is a process and requires some investment from the other person or group. Yet, you are the influential one who sets the tone for the interaction. Remembering that our goal is for people to feel included and cared about in our encounters will often lead us to being spontaneously kind. In this way our intention matters.