



Using the Right Language When Talking About Autism

After reading this brief, you should be able to,

- Define person and condition first language
- Describe current preferred trends
- Detail preferred language

Have you ever been in a situation where you are describing a person with autism – or is it an autistic person? – or a neurodiverse person? – or a person on the spectrum? - and you nearly give up? You want to say the right thing, not offend anyone, be politically correct, and sound like you are savvy. Welcome to the club! At the present time, there seems to be no consensus on preferred autism terminology – whether you have autism or not.

Conceived as a sign of respect, person-first language has been the default language choice since the mid-1970s. According to person-first language, saying “a person with autism” has been the go-to way of describing them. But things have been changing, and identity-first rather than person-first language is emerging as a preferred choice by many and is often a reflection of their pride in being described as autistic. When using identity-first or condition-first language, they are referred to as an “autistic person.” Some autistic people will be happy to tell you that autism isn’t something they “have” – but instead describe it as a foundational part of their core – not something they can put down or take off - like a purse. To make things even more confusing, mixed use of person-first and identity-first terminology has also become acceptable.

For example, editors at magazines written for and about people with autism often report mixing person-first and identity-first language in publications to be an acceptable writing practice

and will defer to a writer's preferences. If someone is writing an article *about* people with autism, the current trend is to ask them how they would like to be identified.

After realizing there is no answer to the question of preferences of identity or person-first language, things get even murkier. Autism isn't the only preferred terminology. Certain words are out, and others are in. For starters, autism rights activists now rail against organizations that seek to promote cures for people with autism, such as in the cases of locating biomarkers or genes that identify the condition of autism in utero or infancy. They argue that if it becomes possible to eliminate autism by terminating pregnancies this practice would narrow the natural range of neurodiversity. They call for autistic people and their allies to join in celebrating the unique possibilities inherent in being different. Instead of focusing on curbing the behaviors associated with autism that have long been described as deficits, such as social, communication, and sensory differences, they advocate for supporting the unique skill sets of autistic persons such as having a deep focus, hypervigilance, and exceptional observational skills. According to autism advocates, it is all a matter of perspective.

Some words do not fit the current mindset of autism activism and awareness. Here's a few pointers to help make some important distinctions – and they are probably easier to identify and remove from your vocabulary than making the complicated decision to go with person or identity-first language. First, get rid of all notions that autism is a bad medical condition to have or that it is "special" as in "special ed." "High functioning" is another term on its way out the door. The idea of autism as a spectrum condition is more descriptive and doesn't create a hierarchy of levels of function. The term Asperger's syndrome or being an "Aspie" used to refer to some of these high-functioning individuals, but nowadays, Asperger's syndrome is not considered a medical diagnosis – and it doesn't help matters that Dr. Asperger himself was a Nazi collaborator who contributed to the demise of countless "inferior" children.

Terms surrounding people with autism such as applied behavioral analysis or ABA have also become subject to scrutiny since they echo our earlier discussions of organizations or

practices that favor cure over acceptance. Interestingly, the month of April – famous for being autism awareness month – has also taken a hit. Some autism activists feel that acceptance is a better and clearer directive for people – accept without trying to change.

So, what's left? Try your hand at words that reflect being different but not defective. Right now, the term neurodiverse is popular. Neuro-differences is a term that's also being batted around. And if things are really complicated, a person might be considered as having a neuro-disorder.

Words have power, but no more power than people. It's perfectly reasonable to give voice to your concerns about what to say and when. People with autism can help you find your way – don't be afraid to ask!