# Person-first Language Quick Reference Guide

AHP believes it is critical to address all areas of marginalization and inequity due to racism, sexism, gender identity and expression, class oppression, substance use, and ableism. Given the divides that exist between groups in the United States, understanding and empathy can be extremely challenging. We feel we have an obligation to address these divides directly by, among other strategies, choosing to use language to create space for understanding, genuine respect, healing, and community.

We also recognize how language influences our internal discourse: how each of us talks about ourselves to ourselves. As we work with those who provide direct service, we hope to instill a capacity to foster equity and dignity in every interaction, conversation, and exchange. While it is one goal to work on how we see and speak to each other, we believe it is equally important to help those we serve to see and speak about themselves with greater fairness, kindness, and equity. This said, however, on an individual level, we should respect a person's choice about what terms they prefer to use when talking about themselves.

This resource offers information and best-practice suggestions to keep in mind while using person-first language, as well as terms to avoid and thus reduce stigma, negative bias, and negative internal discourse.

## Behavioral Health and Justice Involvement

| Identity-first Language | Person-first Language | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| victim, survivor | person who was harmed, person who has experienced. . ., person who has been impacted by. . . | Such identity-first language implies disempowerment of those who have experienced violence. |
| mentally ill | person living with a mental health condition, person with a mental disorder, person with a mental illness | |
| homeless person | person without housing, person experiencing homelessness | |
| prostitute, prostitution, sex worker | person who engages in sex work | These identity-first terms reinforce public and self-stigma as well as negate |

| | | the validity of sex work as a profession. |
|---|---|---|
| ex-prisoner, ex-inmate, ex-felon, ex-offender | person with convictions, person who was formerly incarcerated | |
| illegal immigrant, alien, undocumented, visa overstayer | person without documentation | |
| inmate, felon, offender | people who are incarcerated, people involved in the criminal justice system | |
| parolee, probationer | person on parole or probation | |
| prisoner, convict | person who is/has been incarcerated | |
| slave | person who is/was enslaved | |

## Age, Diagnoses, and Disabilities

| Identity-first Language | Person-first Language | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| the elderly, elderly people | older adults, older people | |
| the aged | persons 65 years and older | |
| aging dependents, seniors, senior citizens | the older population | |
| depressed, deranged, delusional, manic | people with depression, people with schizophrenia, people with bipolar disorder | |
| high(er)-risk group | key/priority populations engaged in high-risk behaviors (e.g., sharing needles) | This term implies that the risk is associated with membership in the group itself rather than with specific high-risk behaviors. |
| suffering from. . . | has a diagnosis of. . . experiencing or living with. . . | Such identity-first language implies disempowerment of those who have mental health conditions. |
| special needs | person with a disability | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| physically challenged | person who has a physical disability | |
| mentally challenged | person with an intellectual disability | |
| mentally retarded | people with intellectual disabilities | |
| handicapped, handi-capable | child with a congenital disability, child with a birth impairment, person with a physical disability | |
| mentally ill | person with a mental disorder, person with a mental illness, person living with a mental health condition | |
| Deaf person, the Deaf | person with deafness, person who is deaf | |
| Deaf-Blind person | person with deafness and blindness | Most deaf or deaf-blind individuals culturally prefer to be called Deaf or Deaf-Blind (capitalized) rather than "hearing-impaired," "people with hearing loss," and so forth. |
| hard-of-hearing person | person with hearing impairment, person with hearing loss | |
| blind person, the blind | person with blindness, person who is blind | |
| visually challenged person | person who is visually impaired | |
| sight-challenged person | person who is visually impaired, person who is vison-impaired | |
| wheelchair user, wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair | person in a wheelchair, person who uses a wheelchair | |
| AIDS victim | person with AIDS | |
| brain damaged | person with a traumatic brain injury | |
| cripple, invalid | person with a physical disability | |
| defective | person with a mental disorder, person with a physical disability | |

| Identity-first Language | Person-first Language | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| crazy, nuts, insane, mental, psycho | person living with a mental health condition, person with a mental health diagnosis, people experiencing mental health problems | |

## Substance Use

| Identity-first Language | Person-first Language | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| abuser, addict, junkie, user | person who uses drugs (PWUD), people with substance use disorders (SUDs), person experiencing an SUD | |
| alcoholic | person with alcohol use disorder | |
| clean | person who received negative toxicology test results | |
| former addict | person in recovery | |
| dirty | person who received positive toxicology test results | |
| opioid substitution, maintenance, or replacement therapy | medications for substance use disorder treatment | |
| dependence | addiction | Addiction takes psychosocial context into account, whereas dependence refers solely to physical health. Addiction is a treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and a person's life experiences. |

# Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

| Terms to Avoid | Preferred Terms | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| Negro, colored, Afro-American | African American/Black | |
| | American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African (AMENA) | |
| Oriental | Asian/Asian American | |
| | BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) | |
| Spanish | Hispanic, Latin(a/o), Latinx, Latin American | |
| | Indigenous People, Native American | |
| Caucasian, European | White, people of European origin | |

# Race, Ethnicity, and Culture: General Terminology

| | |
|---|---|
| race | The social construction and categorization of people based on perceived shared physical traits that result in the maintenance of a sociopolitical hierarchy. |
| racial identity | An individual's sense of being defined, in part, by membership in a particular racial group. The strength of this sense depends on the extent to which an individual has processed and internalized the psychological, sociopolitical, cultural, and other contextual factors related to membership in the group. |
| racial privilege or White privilege | Unearned power that is afforded to White people based on status rather than earned merit and that protects White people from the consequences of being racist and benefitting from systemic racism; such power may come in the form of rights, benefits, social comforts, opportunities, or the ability to define what is normative or valued. |
| racism | A system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on phenotypic properties (e.g., skin color and hair texture associated with "race" in the United States). |
| structural racism | Laws, policies, and practices that produce cumulative, durable, and race-based inequalities and includes the failure to correct previous laws and practices that were explicitly or effectively racist. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| institutional racism | Policies, practices, and procedures of institutions—such as school, health care, law enforcement, and criminal justice systems—that marginalize diverse racial groups. | |
| interpersonal racism | When individuals from socially and politically dominant racial groups behave in ways that diminish and harm people who belong to other racial groups. | |
| internalized racism | The acceptance by diverse racial populations of the negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about themselves—including negative stereotypes and beliefs about complexion and color (i.e., colorism) that reinforce the superiority of Whites and can lead to the perception of themselves as devalued, worthless, and powerless. | |

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity

| Terms to Avoid | Preferred Terms | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| birth sex | sex assigned at birth | |
| natural sex | sex assigned at birth | |
| born a girl, born female | assigned female at birth (AFAB) | |
| born a boy, born male | assigned male at birth (AMAB) | |
| hermaphrodite | intersex | |
| tranny | transgender people | The term "tranny" is considered a slur. |
| transvestite | trans and gender nonbinary folks or folx | |
| transsexual (unless being used medically or the stated preference of the person) | person who has undergone gender confirmation surgery | |
| preferred pronouns | gender and pronoun usage, pronouns, identified pronouns | When writing about a known individual, use that person's identified pronouns. When referring to individuals whose identified pronouns are not known or when the gender irrelevant within the context, use the singular "they" to avoid making assumptions about an individual's gender. |

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity: General Terminology

| | |
|---|---|
| gender | Socially constructed ideas about behavior, actions, and roles of a particular sex. |
| gender-exclusive language | Terms that lump all people under masculine language or within the gender binary (man or woman), which does not include everyone. |
| gender identity | Applies to all individuals and is not a characteristic only of transgender or gender-nonbinary individuals. |
| cisgender | "A person whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth". |
| transgender | "An umbrella term used to describe the full range of people whose gender identity and/or gender role do not conform to what is typically associated with their sex assigned at birth." |
| queer | Consider your audience when using the term "queer"; not everyone receives this word positively. Many members of the LGBTQIA+ community have now reclaimed it. |
| sexual orientation and identity | An enduring disposition to experience sexual, affectional, or romantic attractions to men, women, both, neither, nonbinary people, or all of the above. |

## Socioeconomic Status

| Identity-first Language | Person-first Language | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| the poor | people whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold, people whose self-reported incomes were in the lowest income bracket, people experiencing poverty | Many people find the terms "low-class" and "poor" pejorative. Use person-first language instead. Define income brackets and levels if possible. |
| low-class people | | |
| poor people | | |

## Socioeconomic Status: General Terminology

| | |
|---|---|
| classism | The assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on actual or perceived social class, and the attitudes, policies, and practices that maintain unequal valuing based on class. Classism can be expressed via prejudiced or discriminatory attitudes, language, or behaviors directed toward individuals based on perceived or actual social class. |

| socioeconomic status (SES) | Encompasses not only income but also educational attainment, occupational prestige, and subjective perceptions of social status, social class, quality-of-life attributes and opportunities afforded to people within society and is a consistent predictor of a vast array of psychological outcomes. |
|---|---|

## Preferred Terms

| Terms to Avoid | Preferred Terms | Concern/Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| abusive relationship | relationship with a person who is abusive | |
| prisoner-patient | patient | Health professionals care for patients regardless of their involvement in the justice system. |
| drug abuse, drug misuse | substance use | |
| relapse, slip | experienced a recurrence | Implies moral meanings that suggest a personal failing for some people rather than a legitimate medical issue. |