Disability: Appropriate terminology/phrases

To ensure that you are ‘up to speed’ with the appropriate terminology and phrasing relevant to the area of disability it is recommended that you consult the following ‘easy to read’ guides all located on the ‘Communication’ page of the library guide Disability: a good life (although the links are also provided below). These have been written by people with a disability, produced by peak bodies and widely endorsed by the ‘disability community’. As the title of one of the guides below suggests, language is powerful and this is particularly so when we are discussing population groups in our community who have long been devalued and marginalised.

PWD People with Disability : Guide to reporting disability

Produced by ‘People with Disability, Australia (PWDA), the largest national peak body for people with a disability in Australia. The guide emphasises the importance of being aware of the meaning behind the words you use when talking to, referring to or working with people with disability. It stresses that some terms and language can be a barrier to full participation in society and also can mean people with disability feel hurt and excluded. Go to;


Language is powerful – use it carefully

People who are supported by the disability service provider ‘Scope’ have told the organisation they want to be spoken to as people. Words can affect how people with a disability feel about themselves. Words also affect how the community feel about people with a disability. It is important to use language that empowers people.


There are however a few terms, phrases and current definitions that I would like to draw you attention to that are not necessarily discussed in the above guides. Many of these are still in common use but they are no longer seen as appropriate by the disability community and therefore should be avoided. So please read on…..

*When describing people with a disability who access support/community services use ‘individuals’ - eg. individuals who use support services, the individuals you/we support, individuals who access support services and so on. Other current terms used in industry are; participant, consumer and service user however at TAFE our preferred term is ‘individual’. Most importantly avoid the use of the term ‘clients’ and using ‘them’, ‘they’ to describe the people/individuals being supported by a service. It is common to hear workers say; “….they all got on the train…” “…we took them to the beach…..”. This loses sight of the ‘individual’ (which should be our focus) and emphasises a (devalued) ‘group’ mentality (exactly what we are trying to avoid!)

*Special (eg. special needs, special schools etc). People with a disability are not special. They are people who, by and large, want to live ordinary and typical lives. If a person with a disability requires a particular service or support or aids/equipment to do something, then specify the example/situation.

*People with a disability don’t suffer from a disability, they have a disability

*Distinguishing between people with a disability and the ‘general’ community or general public. There should be no distinction. People with a disability are the general public. If a distinction is necessary state; ‘people with a disability and people without a disability’.
*The term ‘care’. Obviously this word has a relevant and important place in our dialogue and discussions but please be mindful that in certain contexts and when used inappropriately it can imply dependence and passivity – exactly what we want to avoid! You may or may not know that ‘DisabilityCare’ was the term devised by the Commonwealth Government to launch and promote the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The disability community were outraged for the reasons I have outlined above – the connotation here was dependence, passivity, in need of care/charity. The term was subsequently removed!

*The condition formerly known as Asperger syndrome. The latest Diagnostic and Statisticians Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) collapses Asperger syndrome, along with all other Autism related disorders, into one diagnosis - Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Only use ASD.

*Avoid the term ‘fit’. The appropriate term is seizure.

*When describing direct or personal support tasks that a worker may undertake with an individual they support ensure that you place the individual in an active role and accurately describe the activity. For example, don’t use the term ‘feeding’ - the appropriate term/phrases would be assisting or assistance with eating (or whatever activity). Horses are feed, people eat!

Some further phrasing examples;

“Part of your role may be to feed clients” – INCORRECT

“Part of your role may be to assist individuals to eat” or “You may be required to assist individuals eat their meals” - CORRECT

“I showered the client” – INCORRECT

“I assisted the individual to have a shower” – CORRECT