Disability: Appropriate terminology/phrases

Many of the following terms or phrases are still in common use however 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