

# Language that Promotes Equity and Dignity

## SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS



Winnipeg Regional  
Health Authority  
Caring for Health

Office régional de la  
santé de Winnipeg  
À l'écoute de notre santé

## LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT.

It can stigmatize or it can open safe spaces for communication. Shifts in language can facilitate shifts in attitudes, assumptions and behaviours, and help reframe complex issues. If we use language that focuses on systems and circumstances we increase awareness of the inequitable distribution of money, power, and resources that have an impact on health outcomes. It can also help illuminate accessibility barriers experienced by persons with temporary or permanent disabilities. Changing the language we use helps us reframe perspectives so not to focus on individual responsibility and instead recognize how circumstances and conditions shape health outcomes.

**Preferred language** demonstrates respect for the people about/to whom we are speaking. It avoids terms that define people rather than describing their circumstances. For example, “people who use drugs” or “people with disabilities” are more respectful terms than “drug users” or “disabled people”. Inclusive language requires careful listening, to hear the terms people use to describe themselves.



### References:

Anderson DeCoteau, M., Bailey, K., Harlos, S., Moffatt, H. (2016). **Language we use to promote health equity.** Available: [www.wrha.mb.ca/extranet/publichealth/files/UsinglanguageJan2016final.pdf](http://www.wrha.mb.ca/extranet/publichealth/files/UsinglanguageJan2016final.pdf)

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Disabilities Issues Office. (ND). **Words with dignity: Language is powerful.** Available: [www.gov.mb.ca/dio/pdf/dio\\_information\\_card.pdf](http://www.gov.mb.ca/dio/pdf/dio_information_card.pdf)

# IT IS IMPORTANT TO USE LANGUAGE THAT RECOGNIZES THE INHERENT WORTH OF EACH PERSON.

Take the time to reflect on power differentials and privilege in order to choose language that promotes equity and dignity. This document is not intended to create differences, but draw attention to the words we use and the power they have when talking about advantage and disadvantage. As we advance our understanding of equity and dignity we may alter our language with more appropriate terms in alignment with our seven principles.

INSTEAD OF...	...USE THIS
Vulnerable; Marginalized; Equities populations; At-risk; Hard to reach	Structurally disadvantaged; Systematically disadvantaged; Person who is at-risk for
Poor people	People who experience poverty; Low income populations; Low income neighborhoods
The homeless; Homeless people	People who don't have homes; People who experience homelessness; People who are homeless
Indians; Natives; Aboriginals	First Nations, Métis or Inuit peoples as appropriate; Indigenous; citizens of Indigenous Nations; Aboriginal peoples may be used in specific legal and organizational contexts
Oriental; Using "the" before a group name (e.g., The Asians; The Filipinos); Ethnic minority; Visible minority	Context specific: may identify communities, people by origin (e.g., Filipino community; Filipino people) May also identify people of color; racialized communities
Homosexual; using 'the' before a group name (e.g., The gays)	Sexual minorities; LGBTQ people (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirit and queer.)
Conflating transsexual/ transgender/transvestite	Gender minorities; gender-diverse people; trans people; as contrasted with cis-gender
A psycho; a schizo	Person who has experienced psychosis; a person who has schizophrenia
Lunatic; unhinged; maniac, mad, crazy, insane, whacko	Person with a mental illness; person with a mental health issue
Released (from a hospital)	Discharged
Those people, you people	People
The handicapped, special, deformed, the disabled	Person with a disability
Afflicted with... Suffers from...	Person with diabetes, arthritis, etc.
The hearing impaired	Person who is hearing impaired
Developmentally delayed; retarded; mentally challenged	Person with an intellectual disability
Blind	Person who is blind; person who is visually impaired
The learning disabled	Person with a learning disability
Physically challenged; lame; crippled	Person using mobility aids; person with a mobility issue; person with a spinal cord injury; person with polio
Confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair
Handicapped/ disabled parking; handicapped/ disabled washrooms	Accessible parking; accessible washrooms

**Please note:** "Instead of" terms are derived from social contexts and are not actual examples from our health system.

**For more information visit:**

WRHA Health Equity Promotion: <http://www.wrha.mb.ca/about/healthequity/>

WRAH Accessibility: <http://www.wrha.mb.ca/accessibility>