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# Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



## Teaching Inclusivity and Inclusive Language

Think of a time when someone conveyed a message to you that you didn't belong. The rejection may have been deliberate or incidental. The experience might have happened a long time ago or been only moments old. Suppose you were asked to recall how you felt. In that case, your description might include emotional references to hurt feelings, being crushed, or even feeling heartbroken. These expressions tend to use language that focuses on physical pain to talk about social rejection and with good reason. Researchers have found that being excluded activates our pain system. Neurologically we're hardwired to use the same neural pathways for physical and social pain.<sup>1</sup>

To feel terrific, we must connect with others through social interactions that are welcoming. We all have the need to feel wholly accepted as individuals. We also need to know that we have equal footing with others, despite our differences. These are some of the broad fundamentals of inclusivity. It's a way of interacting with people who have typically been marginalized to be supportive. It's also what we're focusing on this month.

### What does it mean to belong?

We respond to the people and situations around us with a complex combination of emotions, intellect, instincts, and intuitiveness, but that's not all. We build on this information with learned social behaviours and cultural influences.

It's how we learn to live our lives both independently and interdependently. Studies show that our social environment profoundly shapes us. We tend to suffer when our social bonds are threatened or severed.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly everyone has experienced feelings of wanting to be included, of wanting to belong. If you don't think it's true, what you can do is reflect on when you were younger and in school, specifically your gym class. Can you feel the nervousness that crept over you while you stood in a line across from people who were assigned the task of picking a team? Even if you were the athletic type, you can probably think of at least one time in your life when you worried that you wouldn't be selected by the team you were hoping to join. For many, it was far worse. Some were afraid that they weren't going to be picked at all. To be the last person meant that you were joining a team that had to take you by default rather than by choice. This nightmarish scenario has played out time and again for many people growing up. It was like a very public affirmation of whether you belonged or you were to be excluded. It hurt if it was the latter, and that pain likely extended into how invested you were in playing and enjoying the game. But if you were fortunate enough to be picked early on, you felt relief and were glad that someone had chosen you.

Inclusivity is essential in all our lives: without it, people are vulnerable to having poor mental health and experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Often, healthy self-worth and self-esteem are tied to feeling included. When you feel like you don't belong anywhere, it can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression.

At work, diversity, equity and inclusion programs are in part meant to recognize the links between inclusivity and health. It can mean the difference between having a successful approach or whether ignorance, disregard, and fear of losing power devolve into tokenism. When a workplace is trapped in a harmonious, conformist way of operating, it's not courageous enough to do the difficult work of assessing what barriers exist for people. While merely going through the motions, companies will miss opportunities. When inclusivity exists, organizations can experience game-changing insights, super-charged creativity and attract the most talented people to join a group of happy and satisfied employees.

### How do you create inclusive environments?

It helps to start with all the little everyday things, like the words you choose to use and how you interact in social settings. People can tell whether you are sincere, trying to be inclusive, and creating a sense of belonging for everyone. Simply tolerating someone who feels like they are on the fringe is inauthentic and certainly not being inclusive. The importance of getting inclusion right does not mean that you should be on a mission to be "indiscriminately inclusive" though.<sup>3</sup> You need to recognize that equity, equality, and privilege are distinct.

- **Equity** is giving people the individualized tools and support they need to succeed.
- **Equality** is giving everyone the same thing.
- **Privilege** is when someone cannot realize that their experiences have given them an advantage over another person. Empathy is sacrificed for judgement and comparisons that push aside opportunities for self-reflection.

Often, in pursuit of demonstrating just how inclusive we are, we can become mired in political correctness. That, too, creates discomfort and stalls real progress towards building inclusive environments. We can believe that we are well-equipped when we've learned a little bit about a subject and feel empowered to stand up for those who are being, in our judgement, persecuted. There are fine lines between appropriation, appreciation, and allyship.

- **Appropriation** takes culturally significant elements from minority or marginalized group. It converts them into something that is devoid of meaning and diminished from the original intentions. It could involve clothing, icons, rituals, or behaviours and is often focused on power or profit by making them seem trendy, exotic, or desirable. Usually, the people appropriating feel entitled to do so and don't realize that they are being insensitive.
- **Appreciation** is learning about culture to understand it and gain perspective and knowledge. There isn't any intention to misuse something or claim expertise. Quite often, permission is sought before using any part of a culture to demonstrate respect.
- **Allyship** is a conscious choice to respectfully advocate, be supportive and accountable for helping people who feel like they don't belong. The ally doesn't benefit from their involvement in any way. They collaborate to achieve common goals.

### Language is essential

Developing awareness of how we communicate and the language we use is key to helping create inclusivity. We use language to make connections with other people and establish belonging. It's a fundamental of human interaction that we are constantly learning. Choosing to use inclusive language means that you are less likely to make someone feel like they don't belong. It frees people from using harmful words. Becoming conscious of phrases and euphemisms you use that could make someone feel diminished will help you eliminate them. Don't be afraid to point out problematic language when you hear it. Words and expressions that may have been popular at one time will only fade away when we hold each other accountable for the language we use. Choosing to use disrespectful language is aggressive. It is important to remember that words can hurt deeply and may not easily be forgotten.

Much of our language is male-centric, which perpetuates detrimental stereotypes of both a speaker and their audience. Inclusive language is conscious and aware of this and avoids discrimination. For example, The United Nations has published a style guide for gender-inclusive language. It offers guidelines for using "non-discriminatory language" and "makes gender visible when it is relevant for communication." It also advocates for not making gender visible when it is not relevant for communication.<sup>4</sup> They provide examples using a scale of less inclusive versus more inclusive:

**Less inclusive**

- Mankind
- Manpower
- Man-made
- Guests should attend with their wives.
- Fathers babysit their children.

**More inclusive**

- Humanity
- Staffing
- Artificial
- Guests should attend with their partners.
- Fathers care for their children.

The best way to begin to evolve your language choices and speech patterns is to operate from a position of being respectful. It is not easy and will take conscious effort and practice and you will make mistakes. If you can find empathy, listen, and learn about how language constantly evolves, you may have an easier time. Becoming stuck in arguments about words being used to express collective and individual identities or freedom of speech/freedom of expression is counterproductive. Making language more specific and accurate improves communication, connection, and meaning. In the end, choosing to use hateful speech and defamatory language can have legal consequences.

**Principles for using inclusive language every day**

Toronto-based YouTuber, Kelly Kitagawa has shared some insightful observations about inclusive language that focuses on four main principles.<sup>5</sup>

1. Put the person first. Everyone is a person.
2. Respect self-identification. Use language consistent with someone's identity. Pronouns are not preferred; they are just pronouns. Give the power to the people over their own stories and how they are described.
3. Proper nouns (names) help avoid stereotyping. They are also more specific.
4. Focus on the situation by using an active voice. It sets up your sentence to describe who is doing the action rather than what is being done to them. It's a good way to identify and eliminate biases.

**Making it easy for kids to learn inclusive language**

Teaching children inclusive language at home helps them feel safe to develop their own unique identities, allows them to relate to their peers, and supports the development of that sense of belonging that is so fundamental to their health and happiness. Focus on modelling understanding and respect by making some simple language swaps.<sup>6</sup>

- Instead of husband/wife, say partner/spouse.
- Instead of girls/boys, say kids/everyone.
- Instead of ladies'/men's room, say bathroom or washroom.
- Instead of brothers/sisters, say siblings.
- If you don't know someone's gender or pronouns, instead of saying his/her, say their.

Children, by nature, are inclusive and accepting. They are constantly learning about their world and environment that and almost nothing seems unimaginable or strange to them. You can read books that support diversity in family structures to help support their learning. Here are a few that you may want to explore with your children.

- *The Great Big Book of Families* by Mary Hoffman
- *A Family is a Family is a Family* by Sara O'Leary
- *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* by Kai Cheng Thom

Finally, modelling inclusive language at home can help teenagers who struggle with creating and developing their own identities. Focus on creating a supportive and safe environment to incite further discussion about gender, sex, or sexual orientation. Take time to appreciate their interest in social causes, awareness, and activism by listening to them and encouraging respectful discussions.



## Choosing inclusivity and belonging through language

You can demonstrate your commitment to fostering inclusivity and belonging by using inclusive language.

Here are seven tips to consider as you try:

1. Don't complain about it or express that you are struggling.
2. Be respectful of the person and their situation.  
For example:
  - If you are speaking with someone who lives with a disability, "speak directly to them rather than through a companion, support person [or] interpreter."
  - Consider any extra time it might take for the person to speak.
  - Avoid references that cause discomfort or are insulting.<sup>7</sup>
3. Don't over-apologize if you make a mistake. It will happen. Your apology forces the other person to discount their feelings to make you feel better.
4. When someone corrects you, acknowledge them with thanks.
5. Reinforce your learning when you need to make a correction by practicing the correct approach three times.
6. If you observe a mistake, offer a quick correction. It helps the person become more aware, demonstrates respect and commitment, and shows empathy and understanding.
7. Consider meeting up with someone else who is working on using inclusive language to practice.

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