

EDI Toolkit: Inclusive Language Guide

Understanding how to use inclusive language when talking about EDI can help you engage in conversations with confidence and increase your awareness and understanding.

EDI and language use

During the development of this toolkit, leaders in research reported their concerns about using the “wrong” language when discussing EDI topics. Many people find it difficult to find the words to engage in conversations, either because they are unaware of the terms or because they worry that they will accidentally offend someone or say something that is unintentionally rude.

It's important to remember that it's okay to get language wrong. Nobody expects you to be perfect. We are all on our own journey of learning around EDI issues. Talking to people about issues and concepts can be intimidating when you are learning and forming your own thoughts and opinions. It's better to talk, say something wrong and learn from it, than shy away from these important topics.

Language is always evolving, and it is important to be mindful of any trends. Language can also be individualised – what one person finds acceptable; another may find inappropriate in certain contexts.

If you do unintentionally offend someone by using the wrong terminology, you can always apologise and ask the person what the preferred term/language choice is. It is much better to go into conversations with humility and being open about not being knowledgeable on certain topics. It shows you are open to learning and engaging in these important conversations.

You may feel uncomfortable talking about EDI issues, but this is just normal. Injustice in society *is* uncomfortable, but it requires all of us to talk about it for changes to happen. You may feel a lot of emotions: fear, confusion, frustration, anger or guilt. This may depend on whether you have experienced discrimination or injustice because of a particular characteristic, or because you haven't. Either way, just ensure that all conversations are kept respectful.

Talking about gender

Sexism can often be subtle in conversations, and we can all be guilty of it without realising. For example, women are [twice as likely to be interrupted in conversation](#) as men, and the language used to describe women and men are very different.

Society often suggests that men can't express their emotions or be “feminine” in any way. This can have a variety of impacts – from suggesting that women are weaker for expressing their emotions, to the mental health impacts that this can also have on men. Be wary of your biases. Feisty, bossy, sassy, cold, dramatic, overambitious... These are words *typically used* to describe women in the workplace. If you wouldn't use an adjective to describe a male colleague, reconsider whether you should use it to describe a woman.

The decreasing representation of women academics with increasing seniority has often been referred to as the '**leaky pipeline**'. Whilst widely used as a 'shorthand' for a reduction of women across career stages from postgraduate student to professor, over time, this has become a [less preferred term](#). There are good reasons to move away from the use of this metaphor as it marginalises and demotivates those already in the system, stereotypes career pathways through academia (which can be varied) and devalues transitions to other sectors. It is useful to bear this in mind if you are thinking about using this term, or avoid its use altogether, and is an example of how change in acceptable language can occur over time.

It is good to practice referring to colleagues by their name. If referring to a group, call them friends or colleagues. Avoid [patronising or gendered terms](#), such as girls, pet, or ladies.

Avoid phrases like "man up" or "grow some balls" or "don't be such a girl". They are incredibly sexist phrases which you may hear in conversation. When these are used to address men, they also perpetuate the stereotype that men can't be emotional, and simultaneously indicate that men are stronger than women.

You can head over to the section discussing Gender as a protected characteristic to find out more.

Talking about gender affirmation

Try to pay attention to your language and [find ways to switch to gender-neutral terms](#). Here are some definitions of terms you may come across in this toolkit. You can also explore the [Stonewall Glossary](#). You can also find definitions in the expander below.

You can head over to the section discussing Gender Affirmation as a protected characteristic to find out more.

Glossary of terms around gender and gender affirmation

Here are some definitions of terms you may come across in this toolkit:

Agender: Refers to a person who does not identify with or experience any gender. Agender is different from non-binary, because many non-binary people do experience gender.

Bigender: A term used to identify a person whose gender identity encompasses two genders, (often man and woman, but not exclusively), or is moving between two genders. More commonly used terms include 'gender fluid' or 'genderqueer'.

Cisgender or cis: Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-trans is also used by some people.

Cross-dresser: A cisgender person who sometimes wears clothes usually associated with the opposite sex, as a form of self-expression.

Gender: Often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender is largely culturally determined and is assumed from the sex assigned at birth.

Genderqueer: A person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders.

Gender dysphoria: Used to describe when a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity. This is also the clinical diagnosis for someone who doesn't feel comfortable with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender expression: How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender, within the context of societal expectations of gender. A person who does not conform to societal expectations of gender may not, however, identify as trans.

Gender fluid: A person who does not identify themselves as having a fixed gender.

Gender identity: A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else (see non-binary below), which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

Gender reassignment/affirmation: Another way of describing a person's transition. To undergo gender affirmation usually means to undergo some sort of medical intervention, but it can also mean changing names, pronouns, dressing differently and living in their self-identified gender.

Gender-variant: A term often used by the medical community to describe individuals who dress, behave, or express themselves in a way that does not conform to dominant gender norms. People outside the medical community tend to avoid this term because it suggests that these identities are abnormal.

Intersex: A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female or non-binary.

Neutrois: A person who has a neutral gender identity or who lacks a specific gender identity.

Non-binary: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.

Pronouns: Words we use to refer to people's gender in conversation - for example, 'he' or 'she'. Some people may prefer others to refer to them in gender neutral language and use pronouns such as they/their and ze/zir.

Queer: Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community (racism, sizeism, ableism, etc). Although some LGBT people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it.

Sex: Assigned to a person based on primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and reproductive functions. Sometimes the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are interchanged to mean 'male' or 'female'.

Third gender: A person who identifies as a gender other than male or female, or as neither male nor female.

Trans: An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser, agender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois.

Trans feminine: A person who is assigned male at birth, who is closer to femininity than masculinity, but is not a binary woman.

Trans man: A person who was assigned female at birth, but whose gender identity is male.

Trans masculine: A person who is assigned female at birth, who is closer to masculinity than femininity, but is not a binary man.

Trans woman: A person who was assigned male at birth, but whose gender identity is female.

Transexual: This was used in the past as a more medical term (similarly to homosexual) to refer to someone whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. This term is still used by some although many people prefer the term trans or transgender.

Transphobia: The fear or dislike of someone based on the fact they are trans, including denying their gender identity or refusing to accept it. Transphobia may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, trans.

Talking about sexual orientation

Sexuality is an important part of our personal identity. Whether or not sexual identity is overtly discussed in the workplace, it is present in many of our conversations and interactions. For example, talking to your colleagues about your husband or wife alludes to your sexual orientation. There are many different types of [sexual identities](#). Familiarizing yourself with terminology will help you when having these conversations. You can find some definitions in the expander below.

You can head over to the section discussing Sexual Orientation as a protected characteristic to find out more.

Glossary of terms around sexual orientation

Asexual: Asexual identity or orientation includes individuals who don't experience sexual attraction to others of any gender.

Aromantic: A romantic orientation that describes people who experiences little or no romantic attraction, regardless of sex or gender.

Bicurious: This refers to people who are questioning or exploring bisexuality, which typically includes curiosity about one's romantic or sexual attraction to people of the same or different genders.

Bisexual: Bisexuality describes those who experience sexual, romantic or emotional attractions to people of more than one gender. The term is also often referred to as "bi".

Closeted: This is also referred to as “in the closet”, and describes people in the LGBTQ+ community who don't publicly or openly share their sexual identity, sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, gender expression or gender identity. Closeted is often understood as the opposite of “out” and refers to the metaphorical hidden or private place a LGBTQ+ person comes from in the process of making decisions about disclosing gender and sexuality.

Coming out: This refers to the process of being open about one's sexuality and gender. For many people of the LGBTQ+ community, “coming out” is not a one-time event. It can be a process, with a series of conversations.

Fluid: This term refers to the fact that sexuality, sexual attraction and sexual behaviour can change over time and be dependent on the situation. It describes those who experience shifts in their sexuality, sexual attraction or sexual behaviour throughout their lifetime or in different situations.

Gay: A term used to describe individuals who experience sexual, romantic or emotional attraction to people of the same or similar gender. Some gay-identified women prefer the term 'lesbian', while others prefer “queer” or “gay”.

Heterosexual: A term that describes people who experience sexual, romantic or emotional attraction to people of the “opposite” gender (e.g. male vs. female, man vs. woman) or a different gender. Both cisgender and transgender identified people can be heterosexual.

Homosexual: This is an outdated term which should be avoided. It is rooted in the fields of medicine and psychology, and refers to people who experience sexual, romantic and emotional attraction to people of the same or similar gender.

Lesbian: A woman who experiences sexual, romantic or emotional attraction to people of the same or similar gender. Some women who are lesbians may also refer to themselves as gay or queer, while others prefer the label 'lesbian'.

LGBTQ+-: This is an acronym that describes individuals who don't identify as exclusively heterosexual or exclusively cisgender. The acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. The + symbolises the many other sexual orientations and gender identities that are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Pansexual: A term that describes an individual who can experience sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction to any person, regardless of that person's gender, sex or sexuality.

Queer: An umbrella term that describes individuals who aren't exclusively heterosexual. The term 'queer' acknowledges that sexuality is a spectrum as opposed to categories. This term once had negative and derogatory connotations, but has now been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community as a way to refer to themselves and others within the community. However, some may still find the term offensive and have negative connotations. It is best to use this term sensitively and respectfully.

Questioning: In the context of sexual orientation refers to the process of being curious about or exploring some aspects of sexuality or gender.

Romantic attraction: the experience of having an emotional response that results in the desire for a romantic, but not necessarily sexual, relationship or interaction with another

person or oneself. Some people experience romantic attraction but don't experience sexual attraction.

Sexual Orientation or sexuality: sexual orientation or sexuality is an aspect of self that involves how you identify, the way you experience sexual or romantic desire (if you do), the gender(s) or sex(es) of the people who someone engages in sexual or romantic activity with and the gender(s) or sex(es) of the people someone is attracted to (if any).

Straight: Also known as heterosexual. Straight describes people who experience sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction to individuals of the "opposite" gender (e.g. male vs female, man vs woman). People who identify as cisgender or transgender can be straight.

Talking about race

It is important to approach the topic of race with humility, sensitivity and respect. We need to be open and willing to listen to others and learn along the way. It's good to be informed of the issues which surround and perpetuate race inequality in order to have meaningful dialogues. Rather than turning to friends and colleagues who are not the same race as you, we recommend self-directed learning.

Even if you do not identify as being racist, the way we speak, the jokes we make and the way we address people can perpetuate or normalise racist stereotypes and [systematic bias](#) associated with race. Some may feel defensive and uncomfortable when talking about racial inequality and injustice. This has been coined as '[white fragility](#)' by author Robin DiAngelo. White people need to be part of the conversations to help dismantle institutional racism. It is important for a white person to [engage in conversations](#) which may make you feel uncomfortable and listen to personal experiences.

Understand that you may be discussing '[race](#)' and '[ethnicity](#)', which are not synonymous. 'Race' is linked with physical attributes such as skin colour and hair texture. 'Ethnicity' is broader and linked to cultural expression and identification.

Language is constantly evolving. Keep in mind that acceptable terminology changes with time. Many phrases that were okay to use in the past, may not be acceptable to use today. For example, the word "coloured" was previously used to describe someone's skin colour, but this word is not acceptable to use today, because of its significant association with colonialism, slavery and apartheid. You can find out more about why the term "coloured" is offensive in a [video](#) from [Show Racism the Red Card](#).

There are some words that you should be mindful when using. A term that was previously used and considered acceptable may no longer be recommended because the language has since evolved. For example, the terms BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) and BME (Black, Minority Ethnic) are no longer recommended for use. This is because they suggest homogeneity amongst distinct groups, and emphasise certain ethnic minority groups (Asian and black) and exclude others (mixed, other and white ethnic minority groups). 'Asian' in 'BAME' is a very broad term, as it could be referring to East Asians, or South Asians. The experiences and difficulties of the Black community are different to those who identify as Asian. This can make individuals feel like their racial identity is not represented or understood. In March 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities [recommended that the government stop using the term BAME](#). Instead, you should refer to ethnic minority groups individually, rather than as a single

group. This is another reason why mistakes can happen, and people do understand this. Be open to being wrong and being corrected.

Be open to challenging individuals if they do say the wrong thing, and equally, be open to being challenged yourself. When challenging someone's language use, do so in a respectful way that identifies what it is that they are saying which is wrong, why this is the case and what they can say instead. You should also think about your response if you are challenged. Avoid responses like, "I'm not racist" or "I was taught to treat everybody the same", as it ends the conversation. Don't engage in conversations simply to reassure yourself that you are not racist. Instead, think about what you can do to be an anti-racist ally.

You may have seen or heard the phrase "playing the race card". This is an extremely offensive and harmful phrase, often used to invalidate the experiences of those who have experienced racism. It is a technique used to shame and silence those who speak out about racial injustice and discrimination. Keep conversations open and do not belittle other people's points of view if you don't immediately understand them. Instead, you can respectfully ask questions and learn more about other people's experiences.

You can head over to the section discussing Race as a protected characteristic to find out more.