

AuSM Advocacy Committee Language Guide

As a member of the AuSM Advocacy Committee (AAC), you are representing AuSM and AuSM's mission. To help ensure that all committee members represent AuSM consistently, this language guide will help guide respectful language while representing AuSM's legislative priorities effectively. In addition, the recommendations made in this guide reflect the fact that AuSM serves a wide population, including autistics themselves, family members, educators, professionals, and other community members. These different groups (and individuals within these different groups) bring a range of viewpoints and needs that we aim to respect in our language.

Individuals on the spectrum are fully human, multi-dimensional, and valued members of our community. They should be spoken to and about with respect and dignity. AuSM does not endorse cause/cure language and language about "recovery" should be avoided. Similarly, autism is not a mental illness or disease. Appropriate ways to refer to it are "autism", "ASD" or "Autism Spectrum Disorder". For additional information on specific issues, please see the attached position statements.

Language should recognize that individuals on the spectrum may require supports but also bring many gifts to society. While we understand that autism can be a challenging disorder, we highly recommend that advocates highlight both the challenges and the gifts that come with autism, as well as the potential that individuals with autism hold when they are effectively supported.

Person-First and Identity-First Language

Currently there isn't a widely accepted way to refer to an individual on the autism spectrum. Some advocate person-first language ("a person with autism") to highlight that an individual is a person before a disability, and their autism does not define them. However others, often self-advocates, note that autism is an important part of their identity that cannot be separated from who they are, and thus recommend identity-first language ("autistic").

AuSM suggests asking people their preferences and respecting their choices. When you do not know personal preference, or are referring to a large group of people, default to person first language.

Functioning Language

AuSM recommends that advocates avoid the terms low-functioning and high-functioning, or mild/severe autism. These terms often can be misleading. Someone who can hold down a job may struggle deeply in other areas of their life. Alternatively, someone who uses a communication device may require no personal support. Additionally, someone's ability to function often depends on context: the environment, the supports in place, their emotional state, and their level of stress. People's abilities will change over time, whereas labels tend to be static. These labels often will be used to deny services to those seen as "high functioning" or to deny the agency and abilities of those seen as "low functioning."



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Instead, you might describe the specific supports or challenges an individual has, talk about the accommodations they need, or simply refer to the individual having autism unless more information is necessary.

Finally, if you are using acronyms, jargon, or other highly specific language, please define the term(s) upon first reference.

Below are some common terms and language to avoid as well as positive alternatives.

Inappropriate Term	Notes	Better Alternatives
Afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, suffers from	These terms assume that the person is a victim or has a reduced quality of life. Avoid terms that connote pity.	Simply facts: has autism, is autistic, is a person with autism
Dumb, mute	These are outdated terms associated with negative images of disability	Speech/communication disability, non-verbal, non-speaking
Crazy, psycho, insane, nuts, wacko, disturbed, deranged, loony, mad, psychopath, sociopath	Outdated terms that imply someone with a mental illness is dangerous, out of control, or evil always should be avoided.	Mental health disability or mental illness
Retarded, brain damaged, slow, moron, idiot, imbecile, psychotic	Many of these words have been used to bully or belittle individuals with disabilities. Refer instead to their specific type of disability.	Learning disability or cognitive disability or person with traumatic brain injury or developmental disability or intellectual disability
Spastic/spaz, cripple, gimp, wheelchair-bound, handicapped, freak	When possible, refer to the specific disability.	Wheelchair user, physically disabled, mobility disability
Handicapable, differently-abled, special, physically challenged, special needs	Made-up and cute terms can be perceived as patronizing	Disabled or person with a disability
Inspirational, courageous, brave	Individuals with disabilities are not inspirational because of their disabilities. Refer to them as such only when it truly makes sense.	Living with a disability
Normal, healthy, able-bodied, whole	These terms imply that people with autism should be more like those without autism.	Typical; allistic (not autistic); non-disabled; neurotypical

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“Don’t have a voice”; “I am their voice”	Every person has some ability to communicate, whether through behavior or words. Don’t presume that you can speak for an individual with a disability.	I amplify their voice
Had a fit, an epileptic fit, spazzing out		Has epilepsy, has a seizure
Illness, disease, sickness, condition	Autism is not a disease, nor is it communicable. It is a neurological difference.	Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD
Battle, warrior, fight	We are not fighting autism. We are advocating for support and living fulfilled lives.	Living with autism, navigating life with autism

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