Your Guide to Using Asset-based Language

A people-first approach is better for everyone

POINTS OF LIGHT

What is   Asset-based Language?

Asset-based language means that, rather than looking at situations or people from a "deficit" lens that prioritizes what's missing or what's wrong, we prioritize language that focuses on strength and potential. An emphasis on asset-based language encourages a growth mindset, reinforces resilient behaviors and communicates a sense of hope.

Your Language Matters

The more you lean into inclusivity, the more you contribute to creating community.

By using inclusive language, you build bridges of understanding.

It starts with you.

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How Being Inclusive Makes a Difference

As a Daily Point of Light honoree, you are an active participant in making the world a better place. You set a strong example. You represent hope. People look to you as a community leader.

Using asset-based language removes the burden of responsibility from those affected and places it back where it belongs — with the systems and people perpetuating oppression.

With that in mind, it's up to each of us to stay up to date on language that's preferred by a given group. Suggestions contained in this guide are likely to change over time.

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DON'T SAY THIS	SAY THIS INSTEAD
Don't use deficit-based language. Avoid language that is needs-driven and problems-focused. For example, referring to people or communities as "marginalized," "at-risk," "in need," "under-served," "less fortunate," "uneducated," "under-represented," etc.	Use asset-based language. Prioritize language that focuses on strengths and the opportunities of a particular community or group of people. When addressing the "issue," focus on the systems and other contributing factors that have played a role. Suggest using: under-resourced or historically excluded.
Don't use power-based language. Avoid language that implies power or "being better" than another group. For example, "giving back to those in need" or "this will help us all appreciate how fortunate we are."	Refer to people in the way they identify. People are often assigned labels like "poor," "needy," "down and out," etc. Instead, consider how they want to be identified (i.e., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, mother, artist, etc.). Suggest using: identifiers
Don't show pity. Avoid language that may place importance on someone's value or sense of worth. For example, "they have nothing" or "I feel sorry for them."	Focus on "with," not "for." As guests in a community that may not be your own, supporters are there to work with the community, not for them. Don't focus on doing for others. Focus on building relationships and doing with others.

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DON'T SAY THIS	SAY THIS INSTEAD
Addicted or alcoholic	Person with substance use disorder
At-risk	Disinvested, disenfranchised, historically underserved or historically excluded (this term provides context rather than using the term "underserved" by itself).
Committed suicide or completed suicide	Died by suicide or suicide death
Crippled or Handicapped (more on ableist language in the corresponding section below)	Disabled (when referencing people); Immobilized (when referencing a situation, such as the economy)
Culture fit – people shouldn't be required to fit in.	Culture add – a person's unique perspective and experience should be seen as an asset that can enrich an organization's culture.
English as a Second Language (ESL)	Bilingual, Multilingual, learner of English as an additional language, culturally and linguistically diverse
First world/third-world country	Use the name of the country or the region (e.g., "East Asia")
Ghetto	Name the specific neighborhood/area.

DON'T SAY THIS	SAY THIS INSTEAD
Give back	Contribute, donate, lend your time and talent; get involved, get civically engaged
Grandfathered in	Legacied Heritaged Tradition Special Case Preauthorized Preapproved Excused Exempted Retained Allowed
Homeless	Unhoused or... "a person who has been excluded from safe and consistent housing"
Illegal Immigrant	Undocumented person
Living in Poverty	Impoverished This word means, "made poor," which is more accurate.

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DON'T SAY THIS	SAY THIS INSTEAD
Low income	People whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold Or people whose self-reported income are in the lowest income bracket
Master bedroom	Primary or main bedroom
Mental health problem, suffering from mental illness, maniac, crazy or insane	Mental health challenge or living with mental illness (name the specific illness if appropriate)
Minority	BIPOC
Powwow	Meeting, brainstorm, put our heads together
Slave	Enslaved person (this term shifts the burden from the victim to the perpetrator)
Spaz	Awkward, clumsy
Special needs	Person with disability
Tribe	Community
Trigger warning	Content warning

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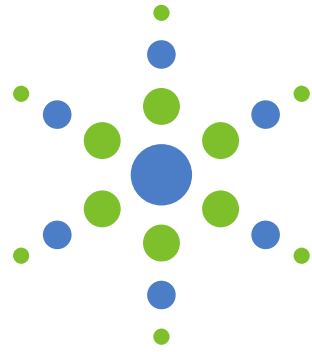| DON'T SAY THIS	SAY THIS INSTEAD
Troubled	Placed at-risk
Underprivileged	People who have been historically underserved
Urban or inner-city	Metropolitan
Victim	Survivor
Voiceless	Silenced
Underrepresented	Excluded

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More Resources

Want more tips and suggestions on how to use asset-based language? Check out these guides:

➢ OxFam Inclusive Language Guide

➢ AP Style Updates: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

➢ A Guide to Reporting on LGBTQ+ Community

➢ GLADD Glossary of Terms: LGBTQ

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Thank you for being inclusive
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