

Professional Etiquette - Language Crash Course

In a healthcare environment meant to not only help but embrace the Neurodivergent population, we want to make sure that all employees are holding themselves to the *highest standards* in ensuring that italk stays a safe environment for everyone. It's not about directness or indirectness. It's about showing mindfulness reflected in your language and promoting a neurodivergent friendly environment for families and children. Remember to allow the community you work with to teach you how to be a better ally and clinician to support their communication needs and life experiences. Should you need to, you can be direct and objective without demeaning or belittling someone.

Here are some examples of language that is absolutely not tolerated and will **lead to intervention**.

1. Outdated or Offensive Terms

Words:	Replacements:
<p>Retarded: this word is extremely hurtful, not because of the actual definition of the word, but because of <i>why</i> it is often used. It's used to label someone as stupid, unable, or slow, comparing a neurotypical person to a neurodivergent person. Watch this video to better understand why this word is harmful to the community. There are other words recently popping up that are also derived from these terms to label someone as incompetent, stupid, or particular.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Restarted: a slang word for the R-word is also unacceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the appropriate medical or diagnosis terms• Disabled
<p>Acoustic: a slang word for "autistic" which is also inappropriately used at times to label someone as "weird" or "really good at one very specific thing but bad at life" or "socially awkward". Acoustic started off as an inside joke more so in the Autistic community, but has been generalized more to the neurotypical space and is being overused and misused.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Savant: an older version of "acoustic" that meant to describe someone who was autistic with extreme intelligence or ability to perform something. This word, despite its intentions to label an individual in an uplifting way, has negative connotations due to it being used as a way to characterize autistic traits as awkward or anti-social.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the appropriate medical or diagnosis terms
<p>Neurospicy: similar to acoustic, this word was generated by the Neurodivergent community first, meaning that an individual's brain structure had an "extra kick" from the norm. However, as it became more generalized, the term went from something endearing/inside joke to an insult. When the Neurodivergent community uses it, the connotation is positive and uplifting, but when a neurotypical person uses it, it often has negative connotations, viewing neurodivergence as something insulting or negative. People in the community also have varying views about it as well.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Neurodivergent individual
<p>Mute / dumb: using these terms to describe an individual who cannot use words effectively to categorize their ability or potential is not professional or appropriate. Use the term "minimally verbal" or describe their ability to communicate such as "She's able to tell me what she wants by tugging at my arms". In the case of selective mutism, use person-first language "she has selective mutism" - do not label someone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the appropriate medical or diagnosis terms

“mute” just because they are not communicating with you. Check out this [reddit page](#) to see real experiences of people with selective mutism.

2. Disrespectful or Demeaning Language/Attitude

Words:	Replacements:
<p>Weird (to describe our Neurodivergent population): calling someone weird - everyone does it or has done it before. Those who need our services often struggle with understanding social cues and the language - would you call a person learning a new language weird for being unfamiliar with the sounds? If something is odd with your interactions, you can label that interaction as strange or odd - but <i>categorizing</i> the person as weird and using that language to describe that person to others in the clinic is highly unprofessional and does not aid in cultivating a Neurodivergent friendly environment. Absolutely do not label their disability, speech characteristic or voice as “weird”. Please watch this video and this blog to further educate yourself on Neurodiversity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the appropriate medical or diagnosis terms
<p>Annoying (to describe our Neurodivergent population): calling a client or their parent/caregiver annoying may sometimes feel valid. However, please use language that is professional and matches the environment that italk aims to foster. If a parent is giving you a hard time about scheduling, please label that interaction as difficult or frustrating. “Annoying” to label someone gives off a personal and negative connotation that does not represent our clinic’s beliefs and professional standards.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a hard time with... • More likely to...
<p>Infantilism of an individual: this one isn’t a word but more so our mannerisms. Treat Neurodivergent adults how you would <i>typically</i> treat adults - with respect for their age and privacy. Using language that does not match their age can mean that you do not expect competence in these interactions. Make sure you are being professional and using appropriate language. A disability of any kind does not negate the individual’s right to dignity and respect. Read this article or this one to educate yourself more about how your language should reflect the proper healthcare service mindset.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “They’re so cute” → “I’m fond of them” • “Good job!” → “Your accuracy was perfect! I observed...”
<p>Special: we hear “Special Education” and “Special Olympics” and know that the term “special” means that it is for those who are developmentally disabled. When you are replacing a medical disability term, such as autism, with the word “special” as a euphemism, it’s implied that you are thinking of the word as something negative - something that we need to talk “around” about. Please do not say things like “Y’know, he’s... special.” Understand that this type of language encourages <i>medical bias</i>. Autism or any other developmental disorder is not something <i>they</i> should be sorry about, and neither should you. Should you <i>need</i> to talk about them or describe them, state their characteristics and skills objectively. Read this article as well as this one to further expand your understanding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the appropriate medical or diagnosis terms
<p>Problematic: labeling an individual with disabilities or their family as problematic is unacceptable. Please mind how your language can harm the individual’s potential and perception. Should you need to communicate difficulties or challenges, simply state those behaviors, such as “He has a hard time following one step directions due to his</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Label the difficulties you’re experiencing,

strong self-directedness that is impeding his ability to learn” instead of “He’s a problem, he doesn’t listen” or “Mom hasn’t been able to pay the past two bills” instead of “She’s problematic with the billing.”	not labeling the person
Lazy: labeling an individual or their family as lazy is also inappropriate. We never know what is going on with the family and what their unique situations are. Remember that we are but one of the services that they are managing in their day to day lives - we may not be a priority at times, but that is something that the client’s family balances. Calling a child lazy for their lack of participation is unacceptable - please say that they have difficulties with being engaged due to lack of motivators or that they need additional support. Calling a parent/caregiver lazy for their inability to follow up with homework, respond to emails or texts, is also inappropriate. Please understand and respect that each household has their own covert difficulties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Label the difficulties you’re experiencing, not labeling the person
Something else: when you say that an individual is “something else” due to behaviors or different beliefs, please be mindful that it is disrespectful and unprofessional. Rather than saying “Oh she’s something else” please objectively state the difficulties or the differences in opinion such as “Yeah she has repeatedly had difficulty with answering on time” or “He struggles with transitioning between activities”. Note that even though you are not saying this directly to the person, using this type of language at italk with the team members casually is also not appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Label the difficulties you’re experiencing, not labeling the person

3. Insensitive Phrases

Words:	Replacements:
What’s wrong with him/her?: when talking with a parent/caregiver, and asking them regarding the reason for the call or the reason for the evaluation, you should never phrase your question like this. Asking a question so casually is insensitive and highly unprofessional.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “What are your concerns?” Do they have any diagnosis that we should be aware of?
Normal kids: the term “normal” implies that everyone who comes to italk who needs our services is abnormal. Negative connotations in language are important to think about. When you say “normal” rather than “typical” or “typically developing” it implies that there is something odd about an “abnormal” child. Understand the importance of using appropriate words in an environment that creates a safe space for the Neurodivergent population. Even if the parents use it, we shouldn’t.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neurotypical Allistic
He/she talks funny: remember that we’re a speech therapy clinic. We understand if you are not yet familiar with disorders such as apraxia or dysarthria. There are other language disorders that impair one’s ability to communicate that may “sound funny” to the uneducated person. However, it is inappropriate in any healthcare setting to label one’s disorder or disability as “funny” - just because you are unfamiliar with the physiological differences. Calling an individual’s speech “funny” when they don’t mean to be is offensive and insensitive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a low speech intelligibility due to...

4. Judgmental Language

Words:	Replacements:
He/she doesn't talk right: it is an ableist mindset to think that the way <i>you</i> are talking is the only right way to talk. Re-think about your priorities when you are communicating with someone. The intent to communicate means that you are open to listen and understand the message that is being conveyed through any modes of communication, such as verbal language, sign language, or AAC. If you need to describe someone's difficulties with communicating, simply objectively state their strengths and weaknesses - without using judgemental language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a low speech intelligibility due to... • Communicates using...
He/she is hopeless: why are we helping them if they're hopeless? If you are working hard at something, and you're not really improving, would you want to be told that you are hopeless? Everyone deserves a voice. Everyone deserves a biased-free environment. Do not judge one's potential or abilities rashly and use language such as this. It is highly unprofessional and unkind.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Label the difficulties that the client is facing and potential reasons why
He/she doesn't/can't listen: let's think about the context in which you need to say this. Why is the individual not listening? Are we listening to their needs? Is that impeding their ability to hear or understand us, or our point of view? For example, if a child has separation anxiety and is unable to follow one step directions such as "sit down and then we can have mommy come in" then is it because the child "can't" listen, or is it that they do not have a strong relationship with you yet, and is struggling with anxiety? Why should they listen to you if they don't see you as someone they can trust, and feel uneasy without their caregiver? This is also the same with parents or caregivers who seem to "not listen" - be mindful of your tone and come to an understanding that they may have their own reasonings, whether we can validate it or not. It is not just our own opinion and beliefs that matter, and we need to take many things into account before passing judgment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Label the difficulties that the client is facing and potential reasons why
He/she can't learn: remember that it may be just your judgment, and your perception. Do not view an individual of this clinic as someone who <i>cannot</i> learn - they are trying, we are trying. They may be able to learn how to read 7 different languages but not differentiate wh-questions. They may not remember to not run in the waiting room and need to be reminded every time, but they learn how to play Minecraft within 10 minutes. Everyone's learning is different, whether it is visual or auditory, or something else entirely. It is highly unprofessional to pass judgment and limit one's potential based on your singular perceptions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Label the difficulties that the client is facing and potential reasons why

This list is not all inclusive, but it does contain a lot of the inappropriate that is realistic to our environment, and some that we have even heard each other say. Let's all be mindful from now on, and understand the reasoning behind the importance of our language in professional etiquette.