

A reader sent a note today asking me not to use the word “normal” on the ground “*the term “normal” has been used to imply that those who are not [normal] are abnormal. It is used particularly to refer to folks with a variety of challenges, both physical, cognitive, and emotional. It’s a term that is used to imply exclusion. I’d appreciate so much if you would consider substituting other words.*

I think the “it” in the reader’s note refers to the word “abnormal” when used to refer to people with cognitive, physical, or emotional disabilities. (To be clear, I did not use the word “abnormal.”) The reader objected to the use of the word “normal” to describe the campaign being run by Kamala Harris and Tim Walz.

I did some research and learned that in medicine and psychiatry, there is a movement away from using the term “normal” to refer to test results or conditions that fall within the expected range of values for a large population. Ironically, those “expected values” are frequently defined by a “normal distribution” curve—a central concept in probability and statistics.

In writing today’s newsletter, I consulted a thesaurus to see if there were acceptable substitutes to the concept of returning to “normalcy”—and there were not. In response to the reader’s note, I asked her to suggest alternatives to the word “normal” and she declined.

I want to be sensitive on this issue because I do not want to unintentionally offend anyone. But it is not clear to me that using the term “normal” to refer to expected results or socially acceptable behavior says anything negative about people who are suffering from physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities.

If you have thoughts on this issue, please write to me at rbhubbell@gmail.com