



USING PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE WORDS MATTER!

The Senior Source interacts with wonderfully diverse people daily. Our clients and volunteers are mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, co-workers, friends, and neighbors. They may also have a diagnosis of a specific disability or series of disabilities. Having the correct diagnoses is, of course, important to ensure proper medical care, needed supports, funding, and adaptive aids. However, having a “disability” or being labeled as “disabled” can also negatively portray someone as needing to be pitied, undesirable, helpless, or a victim.

These unfair and undeserving labels stop at the front doors of The Senior Source. Our staff positively promotes older adults with disabilities who have wants, needs, desires, likes and dislikes and who are recognized as active participants in our society, in their communities, and at home with family and friends, however that is most meaningful to individuals. We emphasize the capabilities of our clients and model what that looks like to care providers and others.

There are a lot of ways to promote the dignity and respect of older adults with disabilities. One way is to use “People First Language.” The words we use and how we talk about people matters. We do not want to use terms that stereotype, devalue or discriminate, but some habits die hard. Naturally, it is best to talk about people in ordinary terms. Most of the time it may not be necessary to mention that an individual has a disability at all. When it is necessary, it is important to do so thoughtfully and with purpose.

“People First Language” is an objective and respectful way to speak about people with disabilities by emphasizing the individual first, apart from their disability. A person has, but is not defined by, their disability. For example, let’s say you have red hair. People may call you “red-headed” or maybe even “a ginger.” That may not sound terrible, but that is because it is not perceived to be “bad” to have red hair. Imagine if society thought having red hair was repulsive, undesirable, perhaps shows a sign of weakness. Being defined as “a ginger” may no longer feel so good. It’s not your fault you were born with red hair. It is just part of who you are. You are a person who happens to have red hair. Same as any individual with a disability ... they are a person who just happens to have a disability. People who have red hair are beautiful! And equally so are people with disabilities.



Here are some other examples of using People First Language:

Ken is a person. Ken has a diagnosis of dementia.

- ✗ Ken is *not* demented.
- ✓ Ken is an individual who has dementia.

Sarah is a person. Sarah uses a wheelchair.

- ✗ Sarah is *not* handicapped.
- ✓ Sarah is an individual who uses a wheelchair.

James is a person. James has a diagnosis of autism.

- ✗ James is *not* autistic.
- ✓ James is an individual who has autism. Another way to say this is James has autism or James is on the autism spectrum.

Bridget is a person. Bridget has a diagnosis of bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia.

- ✗ Bridget is *not* mentally ill nor is she schizophrenic. Bridget is also not suffering from bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia.
- ✓ Bridget is an individual living with bi-polar disorder. Bridget also receives supports and services for schizophrenia.

Using People First Language takes mindful practice. We care about how people view and talk about older adults with disabilities and we are glad you do, too.

For more information, please visit the website of the Texas Council of Developmental Disabilities at <https://tcdd.texas.gov/resources/people-first-language/> and view their informative handout (in English and Spanish) <https://tcdd.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/People1st.pdf> .