

Positive language guidelines for HIV/AIDS communication

“I will remember that I don’t help patients, I help people.”

The Link Pharmacist’s Oath

These are Openly Positive’s positive language guidelines to encourage the use of more sensitive, non-stigmatising language when writing and talking about HIV/AIDS in our lives. The 12 guidelines suggest ways of turning negative, stigmatising language into positive, more people-friendly language.

You are welcome to photocopy these *Positive language guidelines* pages for use on your own, in workshops or in support groups.

Guideline 1:

Avoid labelling people or reducing ourselves
to our HIV status alone

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

HIV positive person or HIV-infected person

Recognise HIV as one part of who we are

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

Person living with HIV or person who has HIV

Guideline 2:

Don't disempower

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS victims

Try to empower and give hope

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

People facing the challenges of living with HIV and AIDS or people affected by HIV and AIDS

Guideline 3:

Don't stigmatise or judge

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS orphans

Humanise

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

Children orphaned by AIDS or children affected by AIDS

Guideline 4:

Don't victimise or criminalise

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

HIV sufferers or AIDS carriers

Humanise

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

People living with HIV

Guideline 5:

Don't sensationalise

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

Full-blown AIDS

Contextualise, describe and inform

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS (and explain HIV progression, as there is no half-blown AIDS)

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

The AIDS disaster or the AIDS time bomb

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

The AIDS epidemic or HIV progression (with ARV treatment, progression to AIDS is no longer inevitable)

Guideline 6:

Don't depersonalise and create distance

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

Patient

Personalise and identify with people

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

Person, Elaine, Derrick

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

Research cohort

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

Research participant

Guideline 7:

Don't generalise or be vague

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS transmission or AIDS test

Specify and be precise

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

HIV transmission or HIV test (you can't pass on AIDS or have an AIDS test)

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS virus

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

HIV (there is no such thing as the AIDS virus – rather say HIV is the virus that causes AIDS if you need to explain)

Guideline 8:

Don't generalise with individual people

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

She is living with HIV/AIDS

Try to individualise with people

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

She is living with HIV or She is living with AIDS
(if factually correct and she has consented)

Guideline 9:

Try not to disguise or avoid

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

The virus

Be as open and transparent as possible

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

HIV

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

He died after a long illness

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

He died from AIDS-related TB

Guideline 10:

Don't exclude

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS conference or AIDS policy

Be inclusive

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

HIV/AIDS conference or HIV/AIDS policy (for convenience, we use *HIV/AIDS* to describe things like policies, conferences, committees, programmes and work, but with people we rather use *HIV and AIDS*)

Guideline 11:

Avoid unnecessary abbreviations

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

PLHAs (in a speech)

Use abbreviations selectively and sensitively

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

People living with HIV and AIDS (more people-friendly, although an abbreviation may be better with repeated use in a long written document)

Guideline 12:

Don't confuse or be inconsistent

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

AIDS patients and people on ARV treatment (in one paragraph)

Be clear and consistent in one document, and make sure headlines and captions to photographs are sensitive and consistent

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

People on ARV treatment (rather use one people-friendly term)