Using Non-Discriminatory Language

This presentation will look at how we can promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) through the language we use when talking to and about people.

As a Telephone Volunteer, it is important that you choose your words carefully when talking and responding to the clients you are supporting.

Over the telephone, it is spoken language which:

- Enables you and the client to **exchange information** (e.g. how they are feeling or whether they have adequate stocks of medication) and

- Enables you to **build a rapport** with them: for a trusting relationship to develop between you

self help uk

For you to be effective in your Telephone Volunteer role, you need to be aware of not presenting yourself as *judgemental* or *biased*

The Equality Act (2010)

In the UK, the law lists "protected characteristics" (aspects of what makes individuals who they are and which can be used to treat them unfairly):

- **age**
- **disability**
- **gender reassignment**
- **pregnancy and maternity (which includes breastfeeding)**
- **race**
- **religion or belief**
- **sex**
- **sexual orientation.**

Lets look at language in relation to these …….

Age

Age is unlike other equality issues: we are all young at some time in our lives and we all expect to get old. Despite this, being old is still often equated with undesirable attributes, such as :

 - dependency, rigidity of thought and the inability to learn new things.

  The vast majority of today's older people are, however, active, fit and independent. The personality traits which are frequently used to describe them in disparaging terms are to be found in some people at all ages and stages of life. They have nothing to do with the process of ageing itself.

Language is a powerful method of structuring attitudes about old age. Words and phrases in common usage, such as *'mutton dressed as lamb*', *'crinklies'*, *'dirty old man*', *'old fogey*', *'old codger*', *'old dear*' and *'old folk*' all conjure up images which leave little doubt about attitudes to old age.

Careful choice of language will help to shape the perspective presented. It is advisable to avoid the term 'the elderly' as this is now regarded by some as depersonalising and distancing and has connotations of dependency and frailty. Other terms, such as 'pensioners' and 'senior citizens', are accepted by some and rejected by others. 'Older people' is generally accepted by all.

Language should be avoided which portray older people *as clumsy, frail, pathetic and needing to be helped*.

Similarly, the link that is assumed between *beauty and youth* implies a link between *old age and ugliness*, and is detrimental to older people.

The best images portray older people as rounded individuals, participating in society.

For younger people, language and image can easily reinforce stereotypes. The image of young people as carefree, without any pressures or worries or without adequate life experience to make informed decisions can be entirely misleading. Some young people are carers, have worked from an early age, have suffered hardship and have had major successes in their lives.

self help uk

Disability

Around 10 million people in the UK are included in the legal definition of disability.

Due to their 'invisibility' it is easy to forget that, for example, that not everyone:

- can leave their home at will

- has good eye sight and hearing

- is able to drive

This can lead to statements like; 'next time you walk into a shop' or 'when you are driving your car'. When talking about disabled people, it is easy to fall into traps arising from the view point of a person without disabilities, which may exclude or offend.

Marginalising

You will marginalise people who share a particular physical disability or have an identifiably different lifestyle by placing them in artificially homogeneous categories based on this one characteristic. Disabled people are especially vulnerable to this. For instance, it is still relatively common practice to define people by their disability, using terminology such as 'epileptics'. To talk instead of 'people with epilepsy' puts this characteristic into the perspective of a much wider life experience. 'People with disabilities' is a term which is commonly used but saying 'disabled people' is also acceptable as it emphasises that people are disabled by a society that doesn't accommodate them, rather than by their condition.

Patronising

All groups perceived as falling short of socially prescribed norms are likely to be seen as inferior in some way. This might not be overt, but it's not always easy to avoid being patronising. People with a disability are especially vulnerable because the media reinforce an image of disabled people as 'unfortunate' and even 'pathetic' objects of patronage rather than as people with legitimate expectations and rights – to accessible public facilities, to employment, to a decent standard of living, for instance.

Condescending language such as 'Joe Bloggs is a polio victim' or 'confined to a wheelchair' should obviously be avoided. Equally undesirable is the portrayal of disabled people as courageous heroes, succeeding in some field despite their disability rather than because of their ability.

Blind people use terms like 'See you later', and can be irritated by well meaning but clumsy attempts to avoid using 'see'. However, try not to use phrases that equate a physical condition with a shortcoming, like 'blind spot' or 'deaf to appeals'.

self help uk

Ethnicity, cultural and religious diversity

We live in a multicultural society, with a rich variety of traditions, cultures and values. However, we are all aware of racism: those beliefs and attitudes expressed in forms of behaviour and institutionalised practices, which serve to discriminate against or to marginalise people judged to be of another 'race'. Unintentional racism, whereby the views, values and attitudes of the dominant (in the UK, white) group are exclusively presented. It can be hard for people to realise that this is in fact what is happening as it is often implicit rather than overt.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is the attribution of particular characteristics – appearance, temperament, potential etc.– to all members of an assumed group or 'race'. 'Race' is in fact a social and political construct rather than a biological one. Members of minority groups can sometimes be seen as deviant or threatening and subsequently stereotyped with negative characteristics – laziness or criminality for example. Even 'benign' stereotyping – as in the notions that all Asians are ambitious or that Muslim girls are passive – can be misleading and damaging.

- Avoid the terms 'non-white' and 'coloured' as these display white ethnocentrism – deviation from the supposed norm – which can obviously be offensive to black and minority ethnic people.

- Use the term 'immigrant' appropriately: in the UK, it is often used incorrectly of people who are actually British nationals and have been born in the United Kingdom, or (again incorrectly) as a term which distinguishes black from white people. Many immigrants are white.

- Use the term which different groups use about themselves: Inuit rather than Eskimo, Native American rather than Red Indian, or particular tribal names.

- Ask for someone's first name or given name rather than their Christian name. Take the trouble to spell and pronounce people's names correctly.

Gender

The English language still tends to assume the world to be male unless proved otherwise: male is the standard, female a deviation from the norm. This tendency to exclude half of society is increasingly being challenged, and being sensitive to the ways in which we use gender-specific words can promote more positive attitudes to equality. Confronting sexism means not just avoiding discriminatory expressions, but thinking about positive ways to include women and men on equal terms.

Terminology

The words we use can reflect the different standards applied to women and men. Avoid irrelevant modifiers like 'woman doctor' or 'male nurse'; the stereotypes implied by terms such as 'working mother' or 'housewife'; and the feminine (i.e. non-standard and often belittling) forms of nouns: actress, comedienne, usherette, hostess, poetess, manageress, and heroine.

- The same words may have different connotations when used of women and men: 'ambitious', for instance, could denote approval of a man, but is often disparaging when said of a woman. Conversely, 'manly' qualities are often complimentary when ascribed to a woman, whereas 'feminine' qualities are usually meant to be derogatory if applied to men.

Women are trivialised by the use of different words to describe their actions: men "talk" but women "gossip" for example. The test is always: would what I have said about this person mean the same and sound right if I said it of someone of the other sex?

In the same way, it is still common for women to be unnecessarily referred to in terms of their appearance, their marital status, their role rather than their actions, and by their first name or social title. Again, always ask yourself whether you would describe or address a man in the same way. 'Girl' is patronising to an adult woman, and so often is 'lady': use them only where it would be appropriate to refer to males as 'boys' or 'gentlemen'.

self help uk

Sexual orientation

There is generally much more awareness about the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual people than there was twenty years ago. This is the result of new civil and legal protections and arising from this an increased openness by gay, lesbian and bisexual people. In the past, imagery of gay and lesbian people was generally confined to narrow stereotypes; the effeminate entertainer, the male hairdresser and the 'butch' lesbian spring to mind. Today, gay people can be open about their sexuality while serving in the armed forces, have an equal age of consent to sexual activity, the right to adopt and foster children and the right to form a civil partnership giving the same rights and responsibilities as heterosexual married couples.

Don't make assumptions about people's sexuality: use "partner" rather than "husband" or "wife" when referring to a client's significant other.

Despite these changes, there are still many people who don't accept lesbian and gay sexuality. There is still much ignorance, prejudice and fear in some people's attitudes to lesbians and gay men. Sometimes the press is responsible for helping to sustain this intolerance, forming and reinforcing attitudes that provoke harassment, discrimination and hostility.

As equal members of society, lesbian, gay and bisexual men and women should be described in terms that do not trivialise or demean them, do not encourage discrimination or distorted images of their lives, do not sensationalise their activities, or imply illegality. Where the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people are different, then inclusion of particular experience in course and other materials, highlights our understanding and acceptance of the worth and value of different lives.

Increase your awareness: take action

• *Be sensitive* to the risk of offending, patronising or excluding, and don't take anything for granted.

• *Try not to generalise* - it is easy to make subconscious assumptions about people (for instance that they are heterosexual, male, white).

• *Avoid stereotyping people* on the basis of one characteristic and not seeing them as they really are.

Through your communication with your clients, you have an opportunity to challenge assumptions and stereotypes, to be inclusive, to value difference, to increase individuals' beliefs in their own worth and potential.