oaap Oregon Attorney Assistance Program

# inSIGHT

**Thrive in Law, Thrive in Life** • ISSUE NO. 130 • SUMMER 2026


## The Language of Neurodiversity

*by Douglas S. Querin*

Language influences how people are perceived, evaluated, and supported in virtually all environments where they live and work together. Current research across neurodiversity fields makes clear that terminology can either reinforce stigma or promote accurate understanding, inclusion, and well-being.

The comments and suggestions below are simple, research-based guidelines to assist all those in the legal workplace today. The goal is not political correctness—it is clarity, respect, and effective communication.

## Language suggestions:

1. **Encourage → Neutral, Respectful, Person-First Language**

    - "Person with ADHD / autism / dyslexia / Tourette Syndrome"
    - "Neurodivergent lawyer" or "lawyer with a neurodivergent profile"
    - "Different cognitive or information-processing style"
    - "Support needs" or "workplace adjustments"
    - "Benefits from clear written instructions"
    - "Works best in a lower-distraction environment"

    These phrases describe function and context without judgment.

2. **Encourage → Focus on Work Impact, Not Labels**

    - "What helps you do your best work?"
    - "What structure or clarity would be useful here?"
    - "Let's identify adjustments that support performance."

    Research shows that focusing on functional needs rather than diagnostic labels improves both communication and outcomes.

3. **Encourage → Respect Individual Preference**

    Preferences vary. Some individuals prefer person-first language ("they are a person with autism"), while others prefer identity-first language ("they are an autistic person"). When appropriate, simply ask or follow the person's lead.

4. **Discourage → Use of Stigmatizing or Deficit-Based Terms**

    Avoid language that implies damage, inadequacy, or character flaws, such as:

    - "Suffers from," "afflicted with," "victim of"
    - "Defective," "broken," "not normal"
    - "Problem employee," "difficult personality"
    - "High-functioning" or "low-functioning"
    - "Can't handle pressure" (when the issue is workload)

    These terms are generally imprecise and often inaccurate.

5. **Discourage → Confusing Style Differences with Ability or Professionalism**

    Differences in communication or work style may reflect normal neurological variation rather than attitude. For example:

    - Direct communication ≠ disrespect.
    - Reduced eye contact ≠ disengagement.
    - Request for written instructions ≠ incompetence.
    - Need for structure ≠ lack of initiative.

6. **Caution → Use Clinical Terms Only When Necessary**

    Words such as "disorder," "impairment," or diagnostic labels may be appropriate in medical or legal documentation contexts (e.g., ADA compliance processes). In everyday workplace communication, neutral descriptions tend to be clearer and less stigmatizing.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Neurodiversity language should:

- ✔ Be respectful
- ✔ Be accurate
- ✔ Focus on work function and support
- ✔ Avoid unnecessary judgment
- ✔ Follow individual preference when known

Clear, respectful language improves trust, performance, and workplace culture — and helps leaders evaluate lawyers based on competence rather than assumptions.

**– DOUGLAS S. QUERIN**
JD, LPC, CADC I
Senior Attorney Counselor, OAAP

## ENDNOTES

1. Bottini, S. B. et al., "Moving from Disorder to Difference: A Systematic Review of Recent Language Use in Autism Research," Autism in Adulthood Vol. 6, Issue. 2 (June 2024): 128-140. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0030.
2. Gernsbacher, M. A., "Editorial perspective: The use of person-first language in scholarly writing may accentuate stigma," Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, Vol. 58, Issue 7 (July 2017): 859–861. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12706
3. Grech, L. B. et al., "Person-first and identity-first disability language: Informing client centred care," Social Science & Medicine Vol. 362, article no. 117444 (December 2024): 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117444
4. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H. et al., "Intensity and Variable Attention: Counter Narrating ADHD, from ADHD Deficits to ADHD Difference.," The British Journal of Social Work, Vol. 53, Issue 8 (December 2023): 3647–3664. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad138