April 2022

HEALTHLINE MEDIA

Conscious Language: Sexual Health

Conscious Language is the intentional use of words and terms to create empathetic, inclusive, and non-stigmatizing health messaging. Being thoughtful in phrasing and framing helps to not perpetuate bias and stigma that contribute to health inequities.

APPROACH

Keep in mind an overall approach to not promote assumptions, bias, or stigma.

Non-stigmatising
Communication does not lead to individual feelings of shame or fear

Non-judgemental
Communication does not associate behavior with the "goodness" of a person

Inclusive
All people feel welcome by materials, physical environments, and social environments

Representative
Communities see themselves in your materials, physical environments, and social environments

Assumption aware
Ingrained normative approaches to sexual health are questioned and acknowledged

Person first
Seeing the individual before the condition, with some exceptions

ASSUMPTIONS

RECOGNIZE → **REDUCE**

Assumptions are beliefs that are thought to be true. Assumptions can inform language choices. Below are some common assumptions in sexual health.

Sex and Gender are binaries and interchangeable → ***Sex and Gender exist on spectrums and are not interchangeable***	Sex encompasses chromosomes, hormones, anatomy, and bodies. Gender refers to the social experience including expected roles, responsibilities, and behavior
Monogamy is the default → ***Relationships are unique and are structured differently for each person***	People may be in an open, polyamorous, or other non-monogamous relationship, or dating more than one person at a time
Someone's identity tells of their behavior → ***Identity, or lack thereof, does not create a full picture of behavior***	For example, a straight or heterosexual person may engage in sexual behavior with people of the same sex or gender
Only certain people need certain information → ***Health information is important for all***	Assuming certain information is not a priority based on identity or other factors can lead to missed opportunities
'Sex' means the same to everyone → ***Sex has unique meanings for all***	These unique meanings can expand beyond activities between one man and one woman involving a penis and vagina
Groups are homogenous→ ***Language choices are informed by individual intersecting identities***	Consider historical, political, and social contexts for language choices

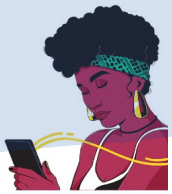
See the next page for language alternatives to common sexual health terms and check out Healthline Media's Conscious Language Guide for additional topics

HEALTHLINE MEDIA

Assumption	Alternative	Application
Infect	Transmit; Aquire; Contract; Got/Have	You can get an STI from an infected partner → *It is possible to contract an STI from a sexual partner who has an STI*
Protect Safe	Reduce your chance; Safer	Protect yourself when having sex → *Reduce your chance of getting an STI by using a condom each time you have penetrative sex*
Males Females Biological sex	Anatomical terms; Assigned sex at birth	Women between the ages of 21 and 65 should get Pap tests → *Pap tests are recommended for all people with cervixes or people assigned female at birth starting at age 21*
Males Females Both sexes Boys and girls	Each person; All bodies; Everyone; Anyone; Adults; Teenagers; People	Both men and women are at risk for an STI → *Anyone engaging in sexual activity has a chance of contracting an STI* Safe sex is important for both males and females → *Safer sex is important for everyone*
Promiscuous	Multiple sex partners; Strengths based approach	Promiscuous behavior increases your risk of getting an STI → *Using a condom or barrier method each time you have sex reduces your chances of getting an STI*
He's clean She's dirty Clean test Dirty test	Positive for; Negative for; Positive test; Negative test; Detected; Found, not found	Does he have gonorrhea? No he's clean → *No, he tested negative* Did the test come back dirty? → *Did the test come back positive?*

Remember!

Context is important.
Language alternatives are options, not rules.
Language choices are dependent on your audience.



Assumption	Alternative	Application
Non compliiant; Non adherent	Not as prescribed; The treatment plan isn't working for them	The patient is not adhering to their medications → *They are not taking their medication as prescribed* Client is medically non compliant → *The treatment plan is not working for them*
Risk Risky; Unsafe; Protected	Chance; Likelihood Sex without a barrier method/condom/ PrEP; Condomless sex; Sex without contraception	Unprotected or risky sex increases your risk of being infected with an STI or getting pregnant → *If you're having sex, consistently using a condom or another barrier method is a good way to reduce your chance of transmitting an STI or getting pregnant*
Queer vs Lesbian, etc.	Consider the history that some words may have "Q" in LGBTQ+ stands for Questioning or Queer	Queer adults over 65 still need regular testing → *LGBTQ+ older adults / LGBTQ+ elders are encouraged to get tested for STIs and HIV*

CONTACT US Bella De Soriano, MPH idesoriano@healthline.com Laura Villarreal, MPH lvillarreal@healthline.com