



## **Person-Directed Language**

### **A Guide to Becoming Person-Directed**

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# Person-Directed Language

## A Guide for Becoming Person-Directed

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## **Purpose**

Language matters! Words and phrases used to describe people affect how those people see themselves in this world. Words have the power to generate respect and understanding and inspire cooperation.

Connection is important for people to feel they are being heard, seen, and understood – which is what most people seek in day-to-day interactions. Using language that focuses on the feelings and needs behind behavior may provide more opportunities for connection with each person.

The purpose of this guide is to explore new ways of thinking, listening, and acting that lead to a more mindful and respectful use of language – or, in other words, to becoming *person-directed* – when writing behavior plans. This guide is not intended to replace the format of any behavior plan, but to enhance existing plans through the use of respectful language that focuses on each person’s feelings and needs.

## **Being Person-Directed**

Being person-directed is a process, not a fix. It involves connecting with others through listening, honoring each person’s feelings and needs, and responding in ways that make sense to each person. Being person-directed means the person and his or her needs, rather than behavior, guide treatment and support.

## Active Listening

Connecting with others requires active listening; a skill used to show other's respect in a relationship. It is in respectful relationships that people can feel heard and understood. Active listening can be an easy skill to learn, but like many skills, one must practice it often for it to become natural. Keep in mind active listening can be used with any type of communication, e.g., verbal, signing, or pointing.

### Listening

- Look at the person in the eye
- Lean toward the person to show your listening
- Nod your head to show you have an understanding
- Allow time and wait for the person to finish
- Pay attention to the person's facial expressions while talking

### Responding

- Acknowledge what the person is saying, e.g., "So you're saying you didn't like what she told you."
- Ask questions to show your interest and to get more information, e.g., "What do you think she meant by that?"
- Clarify what the person is saying through paraphrasing, (repeating back to the person what you heard in your own words)

### Asking Questions

- Ask "what" questions
- Ask "how" questions
- Avoid asking "why" questions
  - Can feel challenging to some people, e.g., "Why in the world did you that?"
  - Does not address solutions or what will happen in the future
  - Focuses on the past, what cannot be changed

### Sharing Experiences

- Tell the person about something similar that happened to you
- Avoid evaluating other's experiences
- Use concrete and specific language, e.g., instead of asking "Would you like help getting over your arachnophobia?" try "Would you like help getting over your fear of spiders?"

## **Becoming Person-Directed: Observations vs. Evaluation**

Making clear observations about behavior, without judgment and evaluation, is a great start to becoming person-directed. Judgment and evaluation are often heard as criticisms, producing unwanted effects – defensiveness, arguments, or shutting down. Clear observations are limited to what is *seen* and *heard*.

### **Consider the following examples of *evaluation* vs. *clear observation***

- John doesn't listen... (evaluation)  
John looks out the window when you are talking to him... (clear observation)
- Mary is being lazy... (evaluation)  
Mary remains in bed at 11am... (clear observation)
- Olivia gorges herself... (evaluation)  
Olivia eats quickly and coughs... (clear observation)
- Tajhi yells rude phrases... (evaluation)  
Tajhi calls his roommate a jerk... (clear observation)
- Nick tries to get staff's attention... (evaluation)  
Nick paces from room to room... (clear observation)
- Michael's behaviors are a result of not getting what he wants. (evaluation)  
Michael will wave his fist in the air when told he can't do something (clear observation)

## **Being Person-Directed: Get Connected**

Often, challenging behavior is a person's attempt to meet an unmet need. If the need goes unmet, the behavior may continue and intensify as the person tries harder to communicate to get the need met.

Connecting empathically with someone means *listening to and honoring the person's feelings and working together to find ways to meet his/her needs*. This requires a change in thinking – a move toward being person-directed, rather than behavior-directed.

### **Activity**

1. *Describe one thing the person says or does that you find challenging.*

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2. *How do you think the person is feeling at that point in time?*

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3. *What do you think the person's needs are at that moment?*

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4. *How do you believe the person would prefer resolving the situation? What is the person hoping will happen?*

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5. *What do you think the person is requesting from you at that point in time? What you can do or say to help?*

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6. *How do you typically respond to the person?*

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## **Being Connected: Feelings List**

Feelings are the perception of events happening inside the body. The following are words used when expressing such experiences. This list is not all-inclusive. It is simply a starting point for acknowledging feelings, empathizing, and making a connection with another person.

There are two parts to this list: feelings people may have when their needs are being met, and feelings people may have when their needs are not being met.

### ***Feelings: Needs are Met***

Affectionate	Hopeful	Peaceful
Comfortable	Content	Proud
Curious	Relaxed	Enthusiastic
Relieved	Excited	Rested
Safe	Friendly	Satisfied
Grateful	Secure	Happy
	Surprised	

### ***Feelings: Needs are not Met***

Afraid	Irritated	Agitated
Lonely	Angry	Overwhelmed
Anxious	Pain	Bored
Restless	Confused	Sad

## **Being Connected: Needs List**

Needs motivate people to act the way they do, often in response to perceived feelings. People act in ways that satisfy needs that are not yet met or fulfilled. (The following list of needs is not all-inclusive.)

### ***Human Needs: Connection***

Acceptance	Love	Affection
Respect	Belonging	Trust
Companionship	Sexual expression	Touch
Compassion	Cooperation	To be known
Empathy	To be seen	Equality
To be understood	Safety (emotional)	Intimacy

### ***Human Needs: Autonomy***

Challenge	Movement/exercise	Choice
Order	Competence	Peace
Consistency	Physical well-being	Contribution
Play	Food/water	Purpose
Freedom	Independence	Rest/sleep
Security	Joy	Stability

## Connecting with People through Language

Establishing respect and cooperation is an important aspect in having a healthy relationship with someone you are supporting.

Statements that

- label (ex: “bossy”, “lazy”, “defiant”, “non-compliant”),
- judge (ex: “right”, “wrong”, “good, bad”),
- blame (ex: “his fault”, “should have”, “she is to blame”),
- deny choice (ex: “have to”, “can’t”, “make her”), or
- demand (ex: “if you don’t”, “you’ll be sorry”)

can compound pain caused by past trauma, conflict, and perhaps coercive techniques.

Pay attention to the language being used and, if necessary, translate it to reflect what the person wants and choices he or she can make.

<b>Wants</b>	<b>Choices</b>
To not be told to comply	To choose to say no and be heard
To not be convinced and persuaded	To choose to make a mistake
To be asked if I’m ok with what is happening	To choose when/why to do something
To not be lectured	To choose to act a certain way
To be validated	To choose how to express my feelings

## Negative Imagery

Imagery refers to a set of mental images. It is a visual description of language, written or spoken; the use of words to paint a picture. Negative imagery consists of mental images that convey a fault or error. It is often used unknowingly, without intention to harm.

### Consider the following examples of *negative imagery* vs. *neutral imagery*:

- Allow people with I/DD to make their own choices. (negative)  
People with I/DD can and do make their own choices. (neutral)
- Symptoms of ASD are impossible to overcome. (negative)  
Symptoms of ASD can be manageable with the right support. (neutral)
- Schizophrenia is a horrible condition to have. (negative)  
The symptoms of schizophrenia may impair a person's occupational abilities. (neutral)
- Adults with I/DD are like kids. (negative)  
Adults with I/DD are contributing members of society. (neutral)
- It can be exhausting to work with people with I/DD. (negative)  
Working an overnight can be tiresome. (neutral)
- People with I/DD have a lot of medical problems. (negative)  
There are some medical conditions commonly seen in people with I/DD. (neutral)
- People with I/DD need structure. (negative)  
People with I/DD can have an everyday life with the right supports. (neutral)

## Microviolence

Sometimes when interacting with a person, one uses words or actions that invalidate and override that person’s feelings, needs, and/or preferences. This is referred to as *microviolence*. It can occur in caregiver relationships when caregivers are unaware of the affect they have on those they support.

*“Microviolence is often hidden or disguised in assumptions, language, and practices. It can remain invisible because of cultural conditioning. It is so pervasive and automatic in everyday life conversations that they are often dismissed as being innocent and inoffensive.”*

~ Guy Legare

Examples of Microviolence	What Might Be Occurring
Disabled to, unable to, can't	I can, am able to when this is happening...
Problems with...	I can manage this in the circumstances
“Needs to...”, “Should always...”	Ask me what I need, give me choices, I have changing needs
“Act like a lady/gentleman”	My behavior will not define me as a “lady/gentleman”
“That behavior is attention-seeking”	My behavior is sometimes how I get my needs met
“When he is defiant, do this...”	If I’m not listening, I may not have heard you, only heard part of what you said, or didn't like what you said
“Carrying dolls is not real life”	I may carry a doll for security, or because I feel needed

Such statements decrease the likelihood of connecting with another person. They increase the likelihood that the person will not feel heard, will not get his or her needs met, and will hear criticism and become defensive.

*“When you change the way you look at things...the things you look at change!”*

~ Physicist David Bohm, 1994

## Empathy

*“Empathy is a respectful understanding of what someone is experiencing. It requires giving full attention to the inner experience of feelings and needs and putting aside for the time being your own judgments, opinions, and fears.”*

*~ Hart and Kindle Hodson, 2006*

Identifying another’s feelings maintains focus on the person, not the behavior. To identify what another person is feeling, imagine the situation from his or her perspective. This is a person-directed approach; it is respectful of the person and encourages team members to practice empathy.

Empathy may be expressed verbally and non-verbally. *Respectful guessing* is one technique used to express empathy verbally. It demonstrates an understanding that one might not comprehend fully what another is feeling. It also invites the person to talk about his or her feelings openly.

Examples of respectful guesses sound like:

- Are you feeling anxious?
- Are you bored? Would you like some ideas about things you can do or would you prefer something else?
- Are you feeling left out?
- Is there anything you would like from me? Or what do you need right now?
- Are you feeling tired?
- Are you feeling overwhelmed?
- Would you like some time to yourself or would like to do something together?

Use respectful guesses any time a person is showing a change in behavior. Make a connection – help the person feel seen, heard, and understood.

## Non-Empathic Responses

Certain responses can unintentionally trigger an unwanted response – defensiveness, ignoring, anger, or aggression. If connection – being heard, seen, and understood – is what the person needs at that time, the following approaches will likely evoke a negative reaction.

Type of Response	Example
Advising	<i>I think you should...</i>
Correcting	<i>It is not how you think it is.</i>
Consoling	<i>When John cries, tell him it will all be fine.</i>
Educating/lecturing	<i>[After a person makes a mistake and gets upset] What did you learn from this?</i>
Explaining	<i>When you break someone's property, you have to pay for the damage.</i>
Evaluating	<i>If you would just have listened.</i>
Fixing	<i>I know just what will help.</i>
Interrogating	<i>Did you shower? Why is the soap dry?</i>
One-upping	<i>Oh yeah? Let me tell you what happened to me.</i>
Shutting down	<i>I can't talk to you right now.</i>
Story-telling	<i>I remember a time when...</i>
Sympathizing	<i>You poor thing!</i>

## **Being Person-Directed: Feedback**

One can gauge the effectiveness of an intervention by observing the feedback (verbal and/or non-verbal) the person offers in any given moment. A person's feedback reflects his or her needs at that specific moment and the effect a response/intervention is having. Caregivers can seek feedback in any situation to determine if what they are doing is helping.

If a person responds positively to an intervention, the intervention is helping. If his or her behavior is getting worse or escalating, the intervention needs to change.

### **Consider the following example:**

*Mary picks up the pillows that her caregiver arranged neatly on the couch and throws them on the floor, laughing. Mary's behavior plan directs caregivers to ask Mary calmly to stop. When Mary's caregivers ask her to stop, she laughs at them and calls them mean staff. If Mary does not stop the behavior, the plan instructs her caregivers to ask her to go to her room. When asked to go to her room, Mary begins swearing and throwing other objects.*

An escalation in behavior is generally an indication that a response is not helping. It might have been helpful for the caregivers to connect with Mary by considering her feelings in that moment. Mary was in a playful mood; she wanted someone to engage with her, not tell her to stop.

## Self-Empathy

It can be difficult to know how to be helpful, what will work, and what will not. There may be times when what you think will help does not. There may be times when you *think* you know what others need and should do, but you are incorrect. Fear of not knowing, or of not being able to fix what is wrong, prevents you from honoring the feedback others offer.

Practice self-empathy; honor your feelings and make a connection with yourself, so that you will be able to connect with others. Self-empathy involves observing your self-talk (what you say to/about yourself), your feelings, and your needs. This self-connection is necessary for you to continue making connections with others.

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