Language dos and don'ts

NOT **myself** TODAY®

Certain types of words or phrases are hurtful and can actually worsen, rather than improve, the dialogue surrounding mental health and mental illness. These words and phrases can also negatively affect those experiencing mental illness, and even occasionally drive people away from getting help.

Negative words also serve to inadvertently feed into stigma about mental illness. Stigma refers to negative attitudes (prejudice) and negative behaviour (discrimination) toward people with mental health problems or mental illness. Stigma means having fixed ideas and judgments about people, as well as fearing and avoiding what we don't understand.

We have a choice in the words we use to describe ourselves, others, and the world around us. Proactively being mindful of our language, and changing it to be more accurate and empathetic towards people experiencing mental illness, can serve to reduce stigma.

As a general rule, never discuss another person's mental health condition at work.

To show sensitivity through our words, here are some suggestions:[1]

INSTEAD OF	PREFERRED LAUGUAGE	EXPLANATION
He/she is mentally ill	He/she has a mental health problem; is experiencing or has experienced a mental illness; has a mental illness.	A person's mental health is only one aspect of who the person is. It doesn't define them. Therefore, you should put the person first in a sentence, then the condition.
He/she is bipolar He/she is depressive He/she is obsessive-compulsive	He/she is living with bipolar disorder. He/she has major depression. He/she has an obsessive-compulsive disorder.	Again, a person isn't the illness; the person **has** an illness. Avoid generalizing or stereotyping people with mental health conditions.
Addict, substance abuser, junkie	Person with substance use disorder Person experiencing an alcohol/drug problem.	Using preferred terms such as substance use disorder focuses more on the medical condition and can increase perceptions of a need for treatment.

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Canadian Mental Health Association
Mental health for all

INSTEAD OF	PREFERRED LAUGUAGE	EXPLANATION
Suffering with, or a victim of a mental illness	Experiencing, or being treated for, or has a diagnosis of, or a history of, mental illness.	Using the word "suffer" may be considered demeaning and disempowering.
Crazy/psycho/insane/schizo/nuts	Never use these words when describing a situation or a person.	These terms can be hurtful and have negative and inaccurate connotations associated with them.
Happy pills, uppers, downers	Prescription drugs, medication, antidepressants.	Referring to medication in this way can trivialize or belittle the condition.
Committed suicide	Died by suicide.	Suicide is not a crime, so we should stop saying that people "commit" suicide.
I'm so depressed (when used casually or in a flippant manner)	I am feeling unhappy or down.	This language usage can trivialize the illness.

Some tips to help you do your part to tackle stigma

The stigma attached to mental health problems and illnesses presents a serious barrier to diagnosis and treatment, as well as acceptance in the community.[2] To help combat stigma, educate yourself about mental health and mental illness. Participating in Not Myself Today® is a great start! Be sure to put the person first and avoid generalizing and using labels. Be aware of the language you use. For example, words like "crazy" and "mental" hurtful and make it harder for those living with mental health problems to reach out for help. A helpful way to recognize attitudes and actions that contribute to stigma of mental health problems or illnesses, is to ask yourself the following questions. **Do the things I hear, read or experience:**

STEREOTYPE people (that is, assume they are all alike rather than individuals)?

TRIVIALIZE or belittle people with mental health problems or mental illnesses and/or the illness itself?

OFFEND people with mental health problems or mental illnesses by insulting them?

PATRONIZE people by treating them as if they were not as good as other people?

If you hear, read or experience any of these, call it out. You can help the person realize how their words affect people facing mental health challenges.[3]

WANT MORE INFO?

- heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/supporting-a-friend-or-family-member-with-a-mental-illness
- ontario.cmha.ca/documents/stigma-and-discrimination
- workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/pdf/Helping_troubled_coworkers.pdf
- workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/newsletter/working-through-it-weekly-emails

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