



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
*Mental health for all*

# Language Do's and Don'ts

When it comes to talking about mental health and mental illnesses, language is very important.

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

Negative words also feed into stigma about mental illnesses. Stigma means having fixed ideas and judgments about people, and can involve fear about what we don't understand. Stigma can lead to prejudice and discrimination against people with mental illnesses. <sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup>

We have a choice about the words we use to describe ourselves, others, and the world around us. We can reduce stigma by being aware of our language, and making it more accurate and compassionate.

Organizations need to ensure everyone in the workplace is treated with respect. To this end, and as a general rule, only talk about an individual's health condition if necessary and only with their permission. <sup>4, 5</sup>





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You can tackle stigma through the language you use, so become aware of it. Often we use certain language without thinking of the consequences it might have. Be sure to put the person and not the illness first, and avoid generalizing, using language that implies a value judgment (e.g. suffering, victim) or labels. Avoid stereotyping or assuming that people in a group are all alike rather than individuals and be aware of oversimplifying the ways that people are alike. Always avoid words like "crazy" and "mental." These types of words are hurtful and make it harder for those living with mental health problems to reach out.

Here are some ways to demonstrate sensitivity through the words we choose. <sup>1, 2, 5, 6, 7</sup>

### Instead of

### Preferred language

### Explanation

A person is mentally ill or insane.

The person has a mental illness or a mental health issue, problem or challenge. They are experiencing or have experienced a mental illness.

A person's mental health is only one aspect of who they are. It doesn't define them. Always put the person first in a sentence before any reference to a condition.

They are bipolar.  
They are depressive.  
They are schizophrenic.  
They are obsessive compulsive.

They have bipolar disorder.  
They have major depression.  
They have schizophrenia.  
They have an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

A person isn't the illness; the person *has* an illness. Avoid generalizing or stereotyping people with mental illnesses.

Addict, junkie.

Person with a substance use disorder.  
Person experiencing an alcohol/drug problem.  
Person in recovery from a substance use disorder.

Using preferred terms such as "substance use disorder" focuses more on the medical condition that requires treatment, just like any other.

Substance abuse

Substance use

Changing this one word may seem minor, but the difference can be significant given that abuse implies negative judgment.





### Instead of

### Preferred language

### Explanation

Suffering with, or victim of mental illness.

Experiencing, living with, or being treated for a mental illness; or has a diagnosis of a mental illness.  
This person is living with/being treated for mental illness.

Using the words "suffer" and "victim" in relation to mental illness may be demeaning and disempowering.

They're acting crazy/psycho/schizo.

If describing someone's behaviour or actions, use objective and specific description instead of catch-all, stigmatizing language.

Avoid using these words when describing a person. They are hurtful and have negative and inaccurate connotations.

This is nuts/insane/crazy.

This is odd/strange/weird/interesting/peculiar.

Even when these words are used to describe a situation and are not directed at an individual, they can be hurtful and perpetuate inaccurate connotations.

Happy pills, uppers, downers.

Prescription drugs, medication, antidepressants

Using trivial terms can belittle a person and their need for medication.

Committed suicide or successful suicide

Unsuccessful or failed suicide

Died by suicide

Attempted suicide

Suicide is not a crime nor is it a success, so avoid the expression "commit" suicide and "successful" suicide.

I'm so depressed (when used casually or in a flippant manner).

I am feeling unhappy or down.

This language can trivialize depression, which is a serious mental illness.





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## Some tips to help you tackle stigma

The stigma attached to mental health problems poses a serious barrier to diagnosis and treatment, as well as acceptance in the community. This happens for many reasons including: <sup>2, 3, 5, 8</sup>

- Individuals may be concerned that they will experience stigma from a medical professional and may therefore be unwilling to ask for help related to a mental illness.
- Hearing and experiencing stigmatizing information over time can result in internalized or self-stigma, where an individual believes these stigmatizing beliefs about themselves and mental illnesses in general. This results in people thinking they don't need help, that there is no help available, or that they don't deserve help. It can also lower self-esteem and increase isolation, which can worsen symptoms of a mental illness.
- Stigma can lead to discrimination resulting in barriers to housing, employment and relationships for those living with a mental illness.

Concerns about experiencing stigma in any of these situations may make someone reluctant to share their experience with a mental illness, which can reduce options for support. Having the right supports can help a person live with symptoms and can assist with their recovery. You can help combat stigma by educating yourself about mental health and mental illnesses and how to discuss these topics.

Beyond adjusting the way you speak or write, you can also recognize stigma and challenge attitudes and actions that contribute to stigma. Ask yourself the following questions:

### Do the things I hear, read or experience: <sup>1, 5</sup>

**Stereotype** people with mental illnesses?

**Trivialize** or belittle people with mental illnesses and/or the illness itself?

**Offend** people with mental illnesses by insulting them?

**Patronize** people with mental health illnesses by treating them as inferior to other people?

If you hear, read or experience any of these, speak up. You can help others see that their words can hurt. <sup>1, 2, 3</sup>



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## Want more info?

- [Supporting friends and family with a mental illness, Here to Help BC](#)
- [Stigma and discrimination, CMHA Ontario](#)
- [Mental health, stigma, and the workplace, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#)



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## Citations

1. Volkow, N.D., Gordon, J.A. & Koob, G.F. (2021). Choosing appropriate language to reduce the stigma around mental illness and substance use disorders. *Neuropsychopharmacol.* 46. Pp. 2230–2232. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41386-021-01069-4>
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7. Mental Health Commission of Canada (August 13, 2020). Language Matters. <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/resource/language-matters>
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