



Mental health inclusive language guide

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#StampedeStigma



Who is this guide for?

The mental health inclusive language guide is for anyone who wants to stampede mental health stigma. It explains how to use language respectfully and inclusively when working with and referring to people with mental health issues. This guide is intended as a learning and awareness tool and should be seen as a starting point, not an exhaustive list.

Why do we need a language guide?

Words and the way we speak have power. It shapes the way we see the world and the people in it. The words we use can convey hope and opportunity or they can reinforce stereotypes and low expectations. We might not be aware of the impact of the words we are using. The words that we use may affect a person's sense of self and perpetuate more disadvantage and social exclusion.

How we speak promotes different types of thoughts, feelings, facts and information. We can check this by asking ourselves questions such as:

- Do I give a sense of commitment, hope and opportunity or a sense of pessimism?
- What else am I saying?
- How will someone else read/hear this?
- What will someone else take from this or understand?

As well as the words we speak we need to be aware of other forms of communication, such as body language.

What terms should I avoid?

'None of us should be defined by our difficulties or diagnoses, or by any single aspect of who we are - we are people first and foremost.'

Mental Health Coordinating Council recovery-oriented language guide.

Instead of asking someone what is wrong with them, ask them what's going on or what their experience is. It is important to listen to and respect how people self-identify. Always respect an individual person's preference for identifying or describing themselves, even if that is not what the majority in a community prefers.

Avoid portraying successful people with mental health issues as superhuman. This carries the assumption that it is rare for people with mental health issues to achieve great things.

Avoid using negative or judgemental language, instead use language that conveys hope and optimism to support and promote a culture of recovery.

What if I say the wrong thing?

People might worry that they will offend or cause harm if they use the wrong term or say the wrong thing. Part of the reason mental health stigma is so prevalent is because we don't feel comfortable talking about mental health issues. That's why it's so important to be curious, find out more and start having conversations around mental health.

If someone calls you out on your language don't get defensive, instead apologise and listen to their feedback. Keep trying to get it right. Changing the way we think and speak is a process and takes time, but can make a big difference in ending mental health stigma and discrimination.

Some general guides for language

DO	DON'T
Say: "person with a mental health condition"	Say: "they are mentally ill" or "they are not normal"
Say: "a person who has been diagnosed with"	Define the person by their mental health issue
Say: "a person with a mental health issue" or "person experiencing a mental health issue"	Use terms like "suffer" or "suffering"
Say: "X lives with a mental health condition"	Say: "X is mentally ill"
Consider words like wild, confusing, impulsive, reckless, fearless, uninformed, selfish	Use insensitive and hurtful words like bonkers, crazy, nutter, loopy, loony bin, psycho, deranged, insane, mad, mental
Consider the behaviours or attributes you are trying to describe and use those words instead i.e. unpredictable, erratic, impulsive, fastidious, meticulous	Use terms like schizophrenic, bipolar, OCD to describe behaviours or traits