



Language
Matters

Combating stigma starts with the language we use. That’s why we must all be conscious of the outdated, prejudicial language being used in the media and around us every day. Everyone can be a champion against stigma when advocating the use of accurate and respectful language. So, as you communicate with others, be mindful of the impact of your language.

Person-first vs. identity-first language

Some individuals with lived experience prefer **person-first language** while others prefer **identity-first language**.*

Person-First Language: de-emphasizes the illness, disability, or condition and focuses instead on the individual.

For some, person-first language feels more inclusive and helps the individual feel respected rather than “abnormal” or “dysfunctional.”

Identity-First Language: emphasizes a person’s cultural identity in relation to their illness, disability, or condition.

For others, the condition, illness, or disability is part of their identity, and they prefer to connect it to who they are.

| Person First | Identity First |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| Person with ADHD | Schizophrenic individual |

* Always ask what a person prefers. Each chooses how they want to self-identify.



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Reference guide – Safer language

Language matters. Just as the right kind of language can help convey acceptance and understanding when talking about mental health problems and mental illnesses, the wrong kind can add to the stigma and rejection people with mental illness so often encounter.

| Language that stigmatizes | Safer choices |
|---|---|
| Substance abuse | Substance use or substance use disorder |
| Patient, client, case | Person living with a mental health problem (or illness) |
| Committed suicide | Died by suicide |
| Failed suicide attempt | Attempted suicide |
| This drives me crazy . | That bothers/annoys/frustrates me. |
| This is nuts/crazy . | This is interesting/strange/peculiar/funny . |
| A person suffering from mental illness | A person living with (or experiencing) mental illness |
| Mentally ill person | She lives with a mental health problem or mental illness. |
| He is an addict/junkie . | He lives with a substance use problem (or disorder) . |
| She is insane . | She has lived experience with a mental health condition . |
| He is schizophrenic . | He lives with schizophrenia . |

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