



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
*Mental health for all*

# Language Do's and Don'ts

Language is very important, especially when it comes to talking about mental health and mental illness.

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 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 toward people experiencing mental illness can serve to reduce stigma.

It is important that organizations ensure everyone in a workplace is treated with respect. As a general rule, remember to talk about a person's health condition only if necessary, and only with the person's permission. It is usually best for the person to inform their co-workers directly if they wish to explain their situation (e.g. why they will be absent or why they are requesting special assignments or being accommodated for a period of time). If you are unsure of what words to use, ask the person how he or she would like to be addressed or referred to.





To show sensitivity through our words, here are some suggestions: <sup>1</sup>

Instead of	Preferred language	Explanation
He/she is mentally ill.	He/she has a mental health issue or 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 has bipolar disorder. He/she has major depression. He/she has an obsessive-compulsive disorder.	Again, a person isn't the illness; the person <i>has</i> an illness. Avoid generalizing or stereotyping people with mental health conditions.
Addict, substance user, 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.
Suffering with, or victim of 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.	Avoid using these words when describing a situation or a person.	These terms can be hurtful and have negative and inaccurate connotations associated with them.





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Instead of	Preferred language	Explanation
Happy pills, uppers, downers.	Prescription drugs, medication, antidepressants.	Referring to medication in trivial terms can 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 issue and people who have the condition itself.

### Some tips to help you do your part to tackle stigma

The stigma attached to mental health problems presents a serious barrier to diagnosis and treatment, as well as acceptance in the community.<sup>2</sup> To help combat stigma, educate yourself about mental health and mental illness. Participating in **Not Myself Today**<sup>®</sup> 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" are not helpful. These types of words are 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 conditions is to ask yourself the following questions: Ask yourself: Do the things I hear, read or experience:

- Stereotype** people with mental health conditions (that is, assume they are all alike rather than individuals)?
- Trivialize** or belittle people with mental health conditions and/or the condition itself?
- Offend** people with mental health conditions by insulting them?
- Patronize** people with mental health conditions by treating them as if they are inferior to other people?



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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 problems.<sup>3</sup>

## Want more info?

- [heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/supporting-a-friend-or-family-member-with-a-mental-illness](http://heretohelp.bc.ca/factsheet/supporting-a-friend-or-family-member-with-a-mental-illness)
- [ontario.cmha.ca/documents/stigma-and-discrimination/](http://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/stigma-and-discrimination/)
- [workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/pdf/Helping\\_troubled\\_coworkers.pdf](http://workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/pdf/Helping_troubled_coworkers.pdf)
- [mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/catalyst-september-2019-banish-stigmatizing-language-make-room-understanding](http://mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/catalyst-september-2019-banish-stigmatizing-language-make-room-understanding)



<sup>1</sup> Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division; Language Matters in Mental Health, Hogg Foundation for Mental Health  
<sup>2</sup> Centre for Addiction and Mental Health  
<sup>3</sup> Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division