



# PERSON-CENTRIC LANGUAGE GUIDE

Mental health issues and substance use disorders are very often misunderstood. One reason for this is the language used to describe mental illness and addiction or those who are affected by it.

Use the following guidelines and terms to appropriately write about mental illness and substance use disorders and those who experience them. These suggestions will also help you produce clearly written materials with understandable reading levels.

- **Conditions** and disorders should not be capitalized. For example, major depression, unless used in a headline, should be lowercase.

Exception: Capitalize any portion of a disorder name, which is a proper noun, such as Tourette’s syndrome or Asperger’s syndrome.

- **People** should never be referred to as “schizophrenics,” “alcoholics,” “anorexics,” etc. People have disorders; they do not become a disorder. Instead, use such phrases as “people with schizophrenia” or “individuals who have anorexia.”
- **Terminology:** Be sensitive to the use of words that connote negativity, such as “problem” to describe a medical condition.
  - Do not describe an individual as *mentally ill*.
  - Avoid descriptions that connote pity, such as *afflicted with*, *suffers from* or *victim of*.
  - Do not use derogatory terms, such as *insane*, *crazy/crazed*, *nuts* or *deranged*.

## Reading Level Guidelines

It takes more than writing short sentences and choosing simple words to reduce reading level. Keep in mind the audience you are writing for and provide relevant information, clear terminology and a conversational—but factual—tone. Substitute the word “doctor” for “physician”. Another example is to use the word “drug” rather than “medication”.

Try not to use more than 15 words in a sentence. Also, be careful of overusing punctuation.

Finally, avoid using words that are three or more syllables. It often cannot be avoided when talking about diagnoses such as depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, but you can limit the number of times the word is used throughout the piece.