

PERSON-CENTERED LANGUAGE GUIDE

Mental illnesses and substance use disorders (SUD) are very often misunderstood. Using person-centered language to talk about mental illness ensures the person is seen as a person first, not as their illness. The following guidelines and terms will help you to appropriately communicate about mental illness and substance use disorders.

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with anorexia • Person has bipolar disorder • Person living with schizophrenia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person is anorexic • Person is bipolar • Person is schizophrenic 	<p>People have disorders; they do not become a disorder.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with substance use disorder • Person has anorexia • Person living with bipolar disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person afflicted with • Person suffers from • Person is a victim of 	<p>Avoid descriptions that connote pity.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with [<i>mental illness diagnosis</i>] • Person has [<i>mental illness diagnosis</i>] • Person living with [<i>mental illness diagnosis</i>] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crazy/crazed • Insane • Nuts • Deranged • Psychotic/Psycho 	<p>Avoid derogatory terms, which perpetuate stigma. Refer to an individual's mental illness only when it is relevant and appropriate. Whenever possible, specify the specific diagnosis a person has.</p>

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with bipolar disorder • Person has schizophrenia • Person living with Tourette’s syndrome • Person has Asperger’s syndrome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person has Bipolar Disorder • Person has Schizophrenia 	<p>Conditions and disorders should not be capitalized, except for certain disorder names that include proper nouns.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person has a substance use disorder • Person has schizophrenia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person has a drug/alcohol problem • Person has a problem 	<p>Avoid using words that connote negativity.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person has a substance use disorder • Person with alcohol use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addict • Junkie • Alcoholic • Drunk 	<p>Using person-first language shows that SUD is an illness.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person in recovery • Person is abstinent from drugs • Person is not drinking or taking drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former addict • Reformed addict • Clean 	<p>Using person-first language shows that SUD is an illness.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use (for illicit drugs) • Misuse (for prescription medications used other than prescribed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abuse 	<p>“Abuse” is associated with negative judgments and punishment.</p>

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Died by suicide • Took/ended his/her/their life • Suicide death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed suicide 	<p>“Committed suicide” implies a criminal activity, which perpetuates the stigma of suicide and indicates moral judgment.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempted suicide • Suicide attempt • Made an attempt at suicide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Un)successful suicide • Failed attempt at suicide • Completed suicide 	<p>Avoid words that glamorize suicide, or connote an achievement or something positive even though they result in tragic outcomes.</p>

REMEMBER:



BE CLEAR

Keep in mind the audience you are writing for and provide relevant information, clear terminology, and a conversational—but factual—tone.



BE POSITIVE

Focus on a person’s strengths or roles where they find meaning. Positive language can bring about recovery and affirmation to those living with a mental health condition or substance use disorder. Negative language can reinforce isolation.



BE RESPECTFUL

It's important to honor the person whom you are referring to when using person-centered language and only mention their mental illness or substance use disorder when appropriate. When in doubt, call someone by their name. A person is not identified by their symptoms.