

The Power of Language

Words are powerful. Even in everyday casual conversation the way we speak about persons, groups and issues affects the hearts and minds of our listeners.

Since the stigma and embarrassment attached to mental illness can be a major barrier to treatment it is especially important to use correct language when speaking of persons touched by mental illness.

PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE

You would not introduce someone as your “cancer friend” because this person is first your friend and secondly someone with cancer. When speaking of a person with any type of disability refer first to the person and then if necessary speak of the disability. (i.e., a person with mental illness, a person who has depression, Betty who is the mother of a son with bi-polar disease)

VICTIMIZATION

Avoid words such as “afflicted,” and “suffers,” as these words can lead to the assumption that all aspects of a person’s life are dominated by their disability and there is nothing they can do about it. The reality is that for many persons with mental illness there are effective treatments and times when the illness does not interfere with their daily life.

HUMOR AND NAME CALLING

Do not use, or tolerate others using words that make fun of mental illness and those whose life is touched by it. Humor that adds to the burden of stigmatization including jokes and stories that mischaracterize mental illness are never appropriate.

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