

When It Comes To Serious Mental Illness... Words Matter

Words are influential—they can heal, and they can harm.

People often identify with roles and words that help them find meaning. Compassionate, stigma-free, person-first words play a role in helping each individual on their road to improved health and functioning from serious mental illness (SMI). So when you choose person-first language, you support their pursuit of healing, progress, and goals.

Language Examples

Want to know how to speak about SMI in a way that avoids stigma? Let us help you out with some suggested terms and phrases to get you started.

You can use “mental illness” and “mental health condition” interchangeably. Many people who have mental health concerns may not have a formal diagnosis or a fully developed illness. They may feel more comfortable with the use of general terms.

⊗ Brain disorder	☑ Mental illness
⊗ Brain disease	☑ Mental health condition

Use person-first language. Put the person first, not the illness. You wouldn't say someone “is cancer.” So we should not identify a person by the mental illness they have either.

⊗ She is bipolar	☑ She lives with bipolar disorder
⊗ Schizophrenic person	☑ She experiences schizophrenia

The way we think about mental illness and the terms we use have thankfully advanced over the years. These outdated words can be offensive, hurtful, and belittle a person who is living with an illness that they did not ask for.

⊗ Mentally Ill	☑ A person with mental illness
⊗ Mental patient	☑ A person living with a mental health condition
⊗ Lunatic	☑ People with mental health conditions
⊗ Disturbed	

Studies show that people may avoid seeking life-saving treatment because they fear being labelled with these terms. None of us want people who struggle with mental illness to feel isolated or “different.” We want to use words that instill hope and are inclusive.

⊗ Crazy	☑ Person with lived experience
⊗ Insane	☑ Person in recovery
⊗ Psycho	☑ Survivor
⊗ Nuts	

For many people, wellness is an ongoing journey. Do not demean or victimize those individuals who work every day for a better tomorrow.

My son:	My son:
⊗ suffers from...	☑ is being treated for...
⊗ is afflicted with...	☑ has a history of...
⊗ is a victim of...	☑ struggles with...

Using the verb “committed” to describe a suicide death suggests that the person did something criminal, immoral, or shameful. Suicide is tragic enough without creating needless blame.

⊗ He committed suicide	☑ He died by suicide
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Do not use diagnostic or mental health terms to explain everyday preferences or behaviors. When we use these terms in a casual way, it weakens the seriousness of mental illness in others’ eyes.

⊗ Don’t touch her stuff. It makes her manic.	☑ She prefers that we leave her stuff alone.
⊗ You’re acting so depressed right now.	☑ You seem sad right now.
⊗ The weather has been really bipolar.	☑ The weather has been unpredictable.

You Can Make A Difference

A person is more than any health-related condition they may have. That includes serious mental illness. No person should be defined by SMI. When you choose your words, the key concept to keep in mind is to recognize and refer to individuals who have SMI – first and foremost – as people. This demonstrates respect for each person’s basic humanity.

**It only takes one person to make a difference.
Be that person.**

Have More Questions?

Visit the SMI Adviser Knowledge Base at <https://smiadviser.org/kbp>