



# **RECOVERY ORIENTED LANGUAGE**


## **A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE**



“Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.”  
- Rita Mae Brown



# INTRODUCTION



For many years, people diagnosed with a mental health condition have been stigmatized and discriminated. Despite progress in the United States and other countries, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against people living with a mental health condition is still a significant problem.

One way we can help reduce stigma is by paying attention to the language we use. The words we use can cause harm by contributing to stigma and discrimination or they can be used to convey hope, inclusion, and optimism.

Therefore, we all play a fundamental role in reducing and eventually eliminating the stigma associated with mental illness.

The purpose of this guide is to highlight the problem of stigmatizing language and offer some helpful tips about appropriate ways to talk about mental health related issues by choosing words that are appropriate and respectful.

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lighting and the lightning bug.”

- Mark Twain

## <sup>1</sup> **Statistics About Mental Health:**

1 in every 8 people in the world live with a mental disorder.

Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds.

Depression is one of the leading causes of disability.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, 2022

## **In the United States...**

Nearly 1 in 5 American adults will have a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year.

(National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2017)

Over 50% of those with clinical level mental health risks do not seek help. 25% of those not seeking help report it is due to not wanting others to know.

(Rapid Report, 2021)



# So, how can you help reduce stigma in mental health?



## Specific Guidelines:

Think about a three-step approach

1. Be aware of your own biases about people who have a mental health condition.
2. Know that words used to describe people can cause harm.
3. Develop the skills to communicate respectfully based on your awareness and knowledge.

“If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

- George Orwell

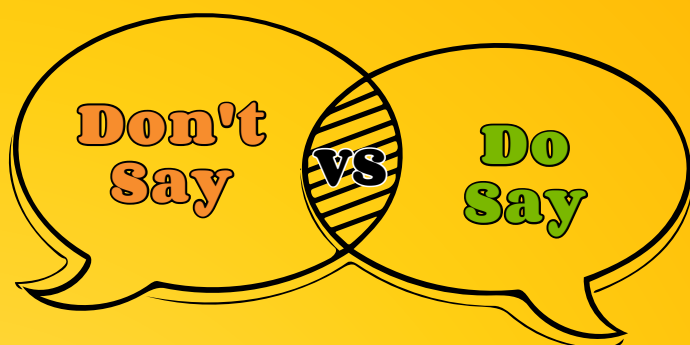
## Helpful Tips:

- Use language which focuses on the person-not their condition.
- Use plain language, avoid jargon or medical terms.
- Use language that promotes hope, inclusion, and optimism.
- Be aware of non-verbal communication (body language).
- Avoid discriminating, stigmatizing language (see table below for helpful tips).
- Use strengths-based language

## Diversity Tip:

People from different cultures may express their distress in different ways. Pay attention to the language people use to describe their symptoms and find out how culture affects the way they perceive their condition.

# Talking About Mental Health Related Issues



## Don't Say:

"Tom is mentally ill"

"Jesse is schizophrenic"

"Taylor has a chronic mental illness"

"They were being psychotic"

"She is manic-depressive"

"He is crazy"

## Do Say:

"Tom is a person living with a mental health condition"

"Jesse has been diagnosed with schizophrenia"

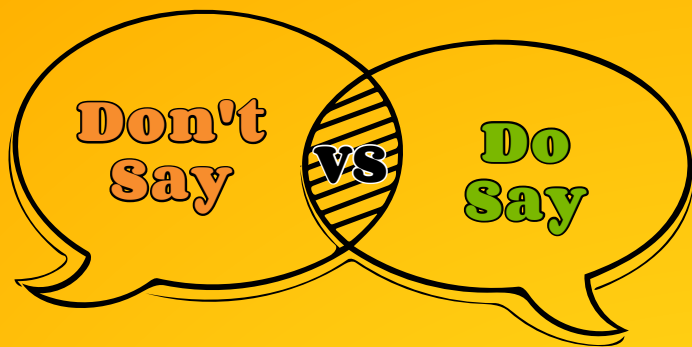
"Taylor has been working towards their recovery for a long time"

"That person's behavior was unusual/erratic"

"She is living with bipolar disorder"

"He seems to be experiencing mental health challenges"





# Talking About Addiction

## Don't Say:

"Mike is an addict, junkie"

"They are an ex-addict/clean"

"She is an alcoholic"

## Do Say:

"Mike is experiencing substance use/abuse problems"

"They are a person in recovery"

"They have an alcohol use disorder"

# Talking About Suicide

## Don't Say:

"Unsuccessful suicide"

"Committed suicide"

"Suicide epidemic"

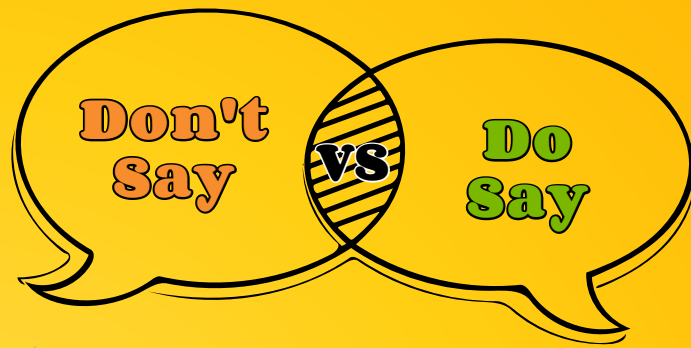
## Do Say:

"Made an attempt to end their life"

"Died by suicide"

"Concerning rates of suicide"

# Alternatives to Stigmatizing Language



## Don't Say:

Mad house/mental institution

Happy pills

Shrink

Trauma victim

Normal behavior

Crazy/insane/disturbed/psycho

## Do Say:

Mental health center/hospital

Antidepressants

Psychiatrist or Psychologist

Trauma survivor

Usual/typical behavior

Person living with a mental health condition