



# Person-First Language

There's an old childhood taunt, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." But words can have lasting, harmful effects. You've likely been hurt by a person's words at some point. Whether on purpose or by accident, the truth is clear — words matter.

Growing awareness about mental health stigma shows we often talk about mental illness in a hurtful manner. Our language can prevent someone from seeking treatment. That's why it helps to remember:

- People are not disorders
- People are not defined by their illnesses or disabilities
- People are, first and foremost, people

Person-first language focuses on the person instead of his or her illness. It's a respectful way to say what a person HAS, not what a person IS. Consider these phrases:

Say...	Instead of...
He's a person with a disability	He's disabled/handicapped
She's a child without disabilities	She's normal
He has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder <i>or</i> He's living with bipolar disorder	He's (a) bipolar
She has a mental health problem	She's mentally ill, emotionally disturbed, psycho, insane
He has a brain injury	He's brain damaged
He hears voices	He's psychotic
She has an intellectual disability	She's mentally retarded
He has autism	He's autistic
She's receiving mental health treatment	She's a patient
He attempted suicide <i>or</i> He died by suicide <i>or</i> completed suicide	Unsuccessful suicide Successfully committed suicide
She's a student receiving special education services	She's special ed <i>or</i> a special education student
He has a substance abuse disorder <i>or</i> He's experiencing a drug and alcohol problem	He's an addict, abuser, junkie
She's experiencing <i>or</i> has a history of mental illness	She's suffering from <i>or</i> is a victim of mental illness

This material provides a general overview of the topic. Health information is not a substitute for diagnosis or treatment by a therapist, physician or other health care professional. Contact a health care professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.



If you're like most people, you've said some things on the stigmatizing list. And you probably didn't know your words might have been hurtful. When in doubt, talk about people first and focus on the person. It might seem like a small change, but it can make a world of difference.

Take the time to learn more about stigma, mental health issues and how you can make a difference.

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