

Use of language around mental ill-health

The language we use when communicating about mental ill-health plays a big role in keeping alive stereotypes, myths and stigma.

It's important to know what kind of language can stigmatise people living with mental illness and what common inaccuracies persist about mental ill-health or mental health care.

The below table is a useful guide that aims to assist individuals and businesses to discuss mental ill-health and avoid using stigmatising terminology and language.

Consider the language you use around mental ill-health

Issue	Problematic	Preferred
Certain language sensationalises mental ill-health and reinforces stigma	✗ Terms such as 'mental patient', 'nutter', 'lunatic', 'psycho', 'schizo', 'deranged', 'mad'	✓ A person is 'living with' or 'has a diagnosis of' a mental illness
Terminology that suggests a lack of quality of life for people with mental ill-health	✗ Referring to someone with a mental illness as a 'victim', 'suffering from' or 'afflicted with' a mental illness	✓ A person is 'being treated for' or 'someone with' a mental illness
Labelling a person by their mental illness	✗ A person is a 'schizophrenic', 'an anorexic'	✓ A person 'has a diagnosis of' or 'is being treated for' schizophrenia
Descriptions of behaviour that imply existence of mental ill-health or are inaccurate	✗ Using words such as 'crazed', 'deranged', 'mad', 'psychotic'	✓ The person's behaviour was unusual or erratic
Colloquialisms about treatment can undermine people's willingness to seek help	✗ Using words such as 'happy pills', 'shrinks', 'mental institution'	✓ Accurate terminology for treatments e.g. antidepressants, psychiatrists or psychologists, mental health hospital
Terminology used out of context adds to misunderstanding and trivialises mental ill-health	✗ Terms like 'psychotic dog', using 'schizophrenic' to denote duality such as 'schizophrenic economy'	✓ Reword any sentence that uses psychiatric or medical terminology incorrectly or out of context

If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.