

Stigma: Language Matters

Stigma is about disrespect

It hurts, punishes and diminishes people.

It harms and undermines all relationships.

It appears in behavior, language, attitude and tone of voice.

It happens even when we don't mean it.

Disrespectful Language

Crazy, lunatic, deficient, wacky, loony tune, psycho, etc.

Manic depressive (when referring to a person)

Schizophrenic.

Handicapped Person.

Slow, low functioning.

Normal.

Respectful Language

Mental illness or psychiatric disability.

Person with bipolar disorder or manic depressive disorder.

Person who has schizophrenia.

Person with a disability.

Person who has cognitive difficulties.

Non-disabled person.

Some Rules of Thumb:

- Don't focus on a disability. Focus instead on issues that affect the quality of life for everyone, e.g., accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, etc.
- Don't portray successful persons with disabilities as super humans. This carries expectations for others and is patronizing to those who make various achievements.
- Don't sensationalize a disability. This means not using terms such as "afflicted with", "suffers from", and "victim of", and so on.
- Don't use generic labels such as "the retarded", "our mentally ill", etc.
- Don't use psychiatric diagnoses as metaphors for other situations, e.g., a "schizophrenic situation". This is not only stigmatizing, but inaccurate.
- Do put people first, not their disabilities. Say for example, "person with schizophrenia" rather than "schizophrenic".
- Do emphasize abilities, not limitations. Terms that are condescending must be avoided.

Source: Adapted from SAMHSA, Center for Mental Health Services and "Removing Bias in Language: Disabilities", APA Style Manual.