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, wacko, loony tune, psycho, etc.
Manic depressive (when referring to an 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.