



Language Matters

Combating stigma related to mental illness, suicide, and substance use starts with how we use language—something that continuously evolves. That’s why we must all be aware of any outdated language being used in the media and around us every day. Everyone can be a champion against stigma when advocating the use of accurate and respectful language. So, as you communicate with others, be mindful of the impact of your language.¹

Person-first language

Person-first language focuses on the individual while de-emphasizing the illness, disability, or condition. Using it shows respect for an individual as a person rather than as “abnormal,” “dysfunctional,” or “disabled.”

Person-first language
an individual who lives with schizophrenia
a person with lived or living experience of substance use

Identity-first language

Identity-first language is rooted in the relationship between a personal-cultural identity and a disability. Individuals and groups who use it as part of their identity focus on their unique abilities rather than the disability.

Identity-first language
autistic person
deaf person

¹ Note: This brochure is a living document and is subject to regular updates.

How to choose

Person-first language is used by most individuals living with a mental health problem or illness and/or people with lived and living experience of substance use. Far fewer (e.g., people living with autism or deafness) use **identity-first language**.²

When writing, person-first language is our recommended first choice, unless you know that an individual or group³ describes themselves otherwise. When talking to a person with lived experience, listen for or ask them about the language they use.

Reference Guide

Stigmatizing	Respectful
It drives me crazy .	It bothers/annoys/frustrates me.
This is nuts .	This is interesting/strange/peculiar/funny .
This individual suffers from depression.	They live with/are experiencing depression.
Mentally ill or insane person	Person living with a mental health problem or illness
Committed suicide, successful suicide	Died by suicide
Failed or unsuccessful suicide attempt	Attempted suicide
Substance abuse	Substance use or substance use disorder
Everyone who is a junkie...	Everyone who uses substances...
They used to be an addict .	They are in recovery .

² In a 2014 survey of 3,000 individuals living with a range of conditions or disabilities, 70 per cent chose “person with a disability” when asked about the language that best describes them; “disabled person” was chosen by just eight per cent. See D. S. Dunn & E. E. Andrews, (2015), Person-first and identity-first language: Developing psychologists’ cultural competence using disability language, *American Psychologist*, 70, 255-264. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038636>

³ Given the cultural basis of identity-first language, the ways groups describe themselves can often be found through an online search for organizations that advocate on their behalf.

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