

# Talking about mental ill-health



When we talk about mental ill-health, the language we use plays a significant role in perpetuating, or preventing, stigma, stereotypes and myths. It's all too common to hear words like 'psycho', 'schizo' or 'crazy' used to describe people living with a mental illness.

Terms like 'OCD' are used as shorthand slang to describe a person's eccentricity, and we may hear phrases like 'you're so bipolar' thrown around in jest. When talking about treatment options, too, colloquialisms like 'shrink' or 'happy pills' often replace accurate terminology, making mental health treatment a source of shame.

Using inaccurate language when it comes to mental ill-health can act as a barrier to help-seeking by stigmatising treatment options or projecting the idea that mental illnesses are somehow shameful.

This includes any terminology that sensationalises mental illness, defines a person by their mental illness or reinforces stigma. It can be difficult to know exactly which words and phrases we should avoid when discussing mental ill-health.

## At work

In a workplace, we may hear misinformation or stigmatising language used in day to day conversations between colleagues. A person who overhears these comments can feel ashamed, upset and may be discouraged from seeking help from employers and others. Because inaccurate language is so pervasive, people may also see it as a sign that discrimination is acceptable. Even if we slip up and find ourselves using problematic language, we can use it as a learning experience.

## Words or phrases to avoid:

- Language that reinforces stereotypes or misconceptions, or anything that encourages discrimination or prejudice against people with mental illness.
- Anything that suggests mental illnesses are all the same.
- Anything that makes an assumption about a person with a mental illness.
- Comments that suggest people with a mental illness are more violent or dangerous, or anything that links mental illness with creativity.
- Language that labels or defines a person by their diagnosis, or suggests that people with a mental illness are 'victims' or are 'suffering'.

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