

# Stigma: Language Matters

*“You finally decide to get help, and then you’re punished for it— pigeonholed into a diagnosis, shamed, labeled, and discriminated against for life. The stigma can be worse than the illness.”*

## 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 a person)  
Schizophrenic  
Handicapped person  
Slow, low-functioning  
Normal

## Respectful Language

Mental illness or psychiatric disability  
Person with bipolar disorder or manic-depressive illness  
Person who has schizophrenia  
Person with a disability  
Person who has cognitive difficulties  
Nondisabled person

## Consider This...

- **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 superhumans.** 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,” “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.

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