

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.

For more information, contact That Anti-Stigma Project
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