

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 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.

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," "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.