

# WORDS MATTER

WHAT DO YOU SAY  
WHEN YOU TALK  
ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?



# WORDS MATTER WHEN TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

When it comes to mental health and mental ill-health, **the words we use** matter more than we think.

The **way** we talk about mental health and people experiencing mental distress can reinforce **negative stereotypes** and **be stigmatising**, without us even realising it.

**Language** is a powerful tool for creating awareness and fighting stigma, so here are a few tips on how to be mindful of the words we use and how to avoid causing offence when we don't mean to.

We have tried to pick terms that are non-stigmatising, but we understand that each person is unique, and some people may not identify with the language chosen here.

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**BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS: DO NOT REFER TO PEOPLE AS THEIR CONDITIONS**

**A person living with a mental health problem is much more than their experience or diagnosis.**

**You couldn't describe yourself with a single word, could you?**

**Avoid the use of diagnostic language when referring people: A diagnosis does not represent a person's whole identity!**

# LABELS

# PEOPLE ARE NOT THEIR CONDITIONS

**NO!**



“A PSYCHO”

“HE/SHE IS A  
SCHIZOPHRENIC ”  
“ A DEPRESSIVE ”



“THE MENTALLY  
ILL/SICK”

“PEOPLE WITH MENTAL  
DISORDERS”

“THE MENTALLY DISEASED/  
DISORDERED”

“A PERSON WITH A  
MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM”

“A PERSON LIVING WITH  
MENTAL ILL HEALTH”

“MENTAL HEALTH  
SERVICE USERS”

“PERSON WITH LIVED  
EXPERIENCE”

“EXPERT BY EXPERIENCE”

**YES!**



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**NO!**

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## SPEAK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE, NOT THE SYMPTOMS

We all have mental health, and we may all experience psychological distress at some point because of specific events or circumstances happening in our lives.

Experiences of mental distress can vary greatly from individual to individual.

When we need to bring up someone's mental ill health, it is better to speak about what they are experiencing, rather than using psychiatric terms.

Terms such as 'illnesses' or 'diseases' can be helpful for some people as they may help them seek help and support, but they can also hinder our understanding of mental distress as a wide spectrum of experiences and feelings.

YES!

NO!

## SPEAK ABOUT EXPERIENCE

## NOT THE SYMPTOMS



“THE PATIENT”



“ SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION ”

” HE/SHE HAS BIPOLAR DISORDER ”

“MENTAL DISEASE”

” SUFFER FROM ”



WORDS MATTER

“PERSON EXPERIENCING MOOD SWINGS”



“SHE / HE IS HEARING VOICES OR HAS UNUSUAL BELIEFS”

“HE / SHE HAS BEEN GIVEN A DIAGNOSIS OF”

“SOMEONE WHO IS CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING”

“A PERSON RECEIVING SUPPORT FOR”

“PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL ILL HEALTH / MENTAL DISTRESS”

“ENCOUNTERING / EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES”



**SPEAK ABOUT  
EXPERIENCE**

**NOT THE  
SYMPTOMS**

**NO!**



**“MENTAL DISEASE”**

**“ENCOUNTERING / EXPERIENCING  
EMOTIONAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL  
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**YES!**

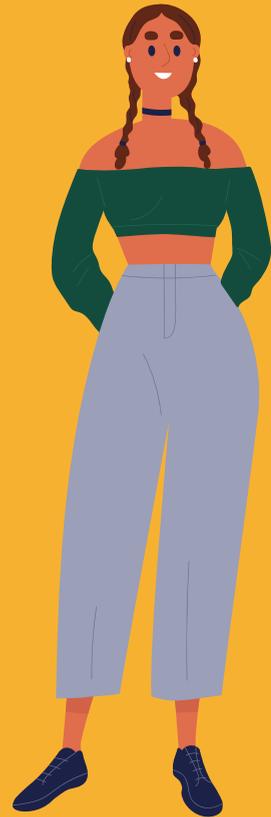


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**“HE / SHE HAS BEEN  
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**“SOMEONE WHO IS  
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**YES!**



**WORDS MATTER**

**NO!**

**SPEAK ABOUT  
EXPERIENCE**

**NOT THE  
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**“ SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION ”**



**“PERSON EXPERIENCING MOOD SWINGS”**

**“SHE / HE IS HEARING VOICES OR  
HAS UNUSUAL BELIEFS”**

**YES!**



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**NO!**

**SPEAK ABOUT  
EXPERIENCE**

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**YES!**

**“THE PATIENT”**

**“A PERSON RECEIVING SUPPORT FOR”**

**“PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL ILL  
HEALTH / MENTAL DISTRESS”**

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## MIND YOUR LANGUAGE, CLICHÉS CAN BE HARMFUL

Too often psychiatric diagnoses are wrongly used in our everyday language, regardless of our mother tongue.

Our language(s) evolve, and we should be extremely cautious not to perpetuate clichés and reinforcing negative stereotypes when talking about mental health.

The media also has a huge influence on people's attitudes and needs to be better informed on how to avoid using sensationalist terms and adopt more realistic, sensitive portrayals of mental health.

**NO!**

**MIND YOUR  
LANGUAGE**

**CLICHÉS CAN  
BE HARMFUL**

" I AM SO OCD, I HAVE CLEANED OUR BEDROOM  
TWICE THIS WEEK "

" WHAT'S GOING ON WITH  
THE WEATHER, IT'S SO  
BIPOLAR "

" POLICEMEN ARREST 'PSYCHO KNIFE-ATTACKER' "

" SCHIZOPHRENIC WHO SENT THE LETTER JAILED "

**YES!**

" STATISTICS SHOW THAT MOST PEOPLE LIVING WITH  
MENTAL ILL HEALTH ARE NO MORE LIKELY TO BE VIOLENT  
THAN ANYONE ELSE. PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL  
DISTRESS ARE UNFORTUNATELY MORE LIKELY TO BE  
VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE OR HARM "

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Mental Health Europe (MHE) is the largest independent network organisation representing mental health users, professionals and services providers across Europe. At MHE, we advocate for a psychosocial approach to mental health, which instead of defining mental ill-health as a 'disease' or 'illness' caused by purely biological factors, looks to a person's life and social environment, treating these factors as equally important in understanding wellbeing and mental ill health. We believe Mental health is not only about disease or the absence of it. It is also about wellbeing and experiencing positive emotions: it is about us, our lives, work, relationships, physical health and social environment.



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