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MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ACT
PROPOSITION 63
CALIFORNIA

WELLNESS · RECOVERY · RESILIENCE

People First Language in Mental Health

Treat People as Individuals

We all want to be accepted for being ourselves. Our talents and skills don't go away because we have a mental health diagnosis. We all want to have our own choices in our lives. We all have different abilities. Nobody wants to be labeled because of their life experiences. We are all unique individuals. Even people with the same type of mental health life experiences are unique. Labeling creates a "stigma" about a person based on one part. That's why it's important to recognize everyone as an *individual* rather than a label. A person is not an illness. We all deserve respect and acceptance.

What is Stigma?

Judging a person based on your own values creates a label. Labeling a person creates a negative image, also known as a "stigma." Stigma is the result of false ideas that people have when they describe someone they see as "different". We "stigmatize" other people when we use a word, phrase or category that is judgmental, which can lead to unfair treatment. This happens because we don't know or understand a person's differences.

Stigma often separates us from the rest of our community, leaving us feeling alone. Stigma comes in many forms. It can be simple and direct like a negative word directed at you. It can also be hidden, like when a person thinks you cannot do your job, or that you are violent and dangerous because of your life experiences. Stigma can come from family and friends or from strangers and even sometimes from medical or mental health professionals. Sometimes, you can even stigmatize yourself by believing and accepting

other people's false labels about yourself. Labels are not usually correct and lead to isolation. Even the idea that only some people can recover creates a stigma. Recovery is an individual choice and varies from person to person. In these ways, stigma may negatively impact your own mental health and prevent you from living the life that you want.

Avoid Stigma with People First Language

If you speak with someone living with a mental health disability, remember to speak to the person **first** and then the disability second.

Here are some examples:

Don't say: "mentally ill people"
Do say: "people with mental health experiences"

Don't say: "bipolar person"
Do say: "a person living with bipolar disorder"

Using People First Language to address individuals with mental health disabilities is more inclusive. People First Language helps a person feel respected rather than labeled as "abnormal" or "dysfunctional." You can also help educate others about using People First Language.

Words to Avoid

Harmful words are the driving force behind stigma. Some words can be hurtful and limit a person's full potential. Words can leave a person feeling rejected and alone. The stigma created by certain words and phrases can impact how you live your life by making you feel that you are not "good enough" or that you are "less than" others.

Some words are still used today that reflect false beliefs about people with mental health life experiences. False beliefs can cause low self-esteem and may affect your everyday activities.

Some mental health stigmatizing words to avoid are:

- Mentally ill
- Emotionally disturbed
- Insane
- Crazy
- Odd
- Abnormal
- Psycho
- Maniac
- Lunatic
- Looney
- Wacko
- Cuckoo
- Mental
- Deranged
- Mad

- Loopy
- Out of it
- Slow
- Nuts
- Disturbed
- Demented
- Screw Loose
- Brain dead
- High or low functioning
- Delusional
- Case
- Decompensate
- Issues
- Schizophrenic

By avoiding the use of terms like these, you will be more respectful of people with mental health disabilities.

Preferred Words or Phrases to Use

For many people, using the following term "a person with a mental health challenge" is less threatening and more accepted. Some people prefer "a person with mental health life experiences". And some people prefer "a

person with a mental health diagnosis" or "a person with a mental health disability". Others prefer "a person with a psychiatric disability" or "a person with lived experience". You should always ask what a person prefers first. Each person makes their own choice about how they want to self identify. When in doubt call the person by their name.

Other Resources

BMC Health Services Research released their report on 250 labels used to stigmatize people with mental illness. It can be found at: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1925070/

We want to hear from you! After reading this fact sheet please take this short survey and give us your feedback.

English version: http://fs12.formsite.com/disabilityrightsca/form54/index.html

Spanish version: http://fs12.formsite.com/disabilityrightsca/form55/index.html

The Stigma, Discrimination, Reduction and Advancing Policy to Eliminate Discrimination Program (APEDP), is funded by the voter approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63) and administered by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA). County MHSA funds support CalMHSA, which is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities. CalMHSA operates services and education programs on a statewide, regional and local basis. For more information, visit http://www.calmhsa.org*.*