

Ten Commandments for How to Talk About Mental Health

1. When using diagnostic terms, put the person first, not the illness.

"Person-first" language is "Mary has _____" (e.g., "schizophrenia," "bipolar disorder"), not "Mary is _____" (e.g., "schizophrenic," "bipolar").

2. Don't say "mentally disabled," "mentally handicapped," or "mentally ill."

Say, "has a mental illness." It can also be appropriate to say "mental health condition," since many people who deal with mental health concerns may not have a formal diagnosis or a full-fledged illness.

3. Don't use the terms "retarded" or "mentally retarded."

The current preferred language is to say a person "has an intellectual or developmental disability."

4. Don't use insensitive terms ("crazy," "insane," "psycho," "nuts," "deranged") to describe someone displaying unusual or violent behaviors, or who may have a mental illness.

5. Don't say "addict," "junkie," "drunk," or any of the other derogatory terms related to addiction or misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Say, "has a substance use disorder," or "has an alcohol or drug problem."

6. Don't say "brain-damaged" or "demented." Say "has a brain injury" or "has dementia." 7. Don't say "committed suicide," which refers to the outdated notion that suicidal acts were crimes; say "died by suicide."

Also, don't say that a suicide attempt was "failed" or "successful."

8. Don't use terms that suggest pity, like "suffering from," "victim of," or "afflicted with," when referring to someone's illness or disability.

Instead say, "has a history of," "is being treated for," or "lives with."

9. Don't use diagnostic or mental health terms to explain everyday individual idiosyncrasies or other behavior common to many people, such as, "that's my OCD" or "I'm so ADHD."

10. Despite these guidelines, still respect each individual's preference for how they wish to refer to their own mental health status.

Some terms you may hear when someone refers to their personal mental health issues include "consumer," "survivor," "person with lived experience," or "person in recovery," among others.

Finally, mental health providers still routinely use the terms "client" and "patient" depending on the specific treatment setting.