Our words matter: Quick reference guide for service providers

This guide has been developed to support service providers and staff to communicate about mental health and wellbeing, mental health concerns, suicide and self-harm, eating disorders and use of alcohol and other drugs (AOD).

Service providers have a key role in stigma reduction and have an opportunity to engage with language that is empowering and reflects people's lived and living experiences.

It is recommended that this guidance is utilised in all areas of service delivery including but not limited to providing individual or group support, clinical documentation, team meetings, supervision, media communication and professional development.

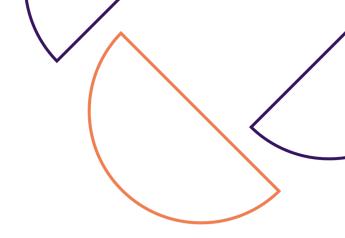**For more detail and context, access the guidelines in full here.**

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Always consider the impact of language on the people that you are communicating about, as well as the impact it may have on audiences.

Key principles:

- Use language that empowers and reflects peoples lived and living experience to avoid defining or a labelling a person by a clinical diagnosis only

- Focus on language that is strengths based, recovery orientated and provides hope

- Always consider the short and long term impact of your language on the people you are providing support to, educating, providing documentation for and about and the peers you communicate with

- Use language that reduces stigma and promotes empathy and understanding towards people with a lived or living experience

- Be aware that people with a lived or living experience may not agree with the use of diagnostic language due to historical stigma and they may not feel this langauge reflects their unique and personal experience

- Acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse groups may have different beliefs, understandings or words used when communicating about their experiences

- Consider the language preferences of specific populations or communities and adapt language to suit audiences

- Avoid the use of acronyms or clinical jargon that may not be understood by the general public and check for individuals' understanding of content

- Use an individual's preferred name and pronouns and encourage others to do the same

- Consider what details are necessary and who they need to be shared with

- Reframe terms historically used in health services, e.g., 'treatment resistant' or 'non-compliant', as they are potentially disempowering or may imply judgements about the person accessing the service.

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Examples of reframing language used in service provision:

Preferred	Problematic
A person living with (preferred term or diagnosis) A person living with symptoms of (preferred term or diagnosis)	Equating a person with a diagnosis e.g. an anorexic, a schizophrenic
Current treatments have not alleviated symptoms	Treatment resistant
Expressing concerns about the treatment plan	Non-compliant
Agreeable with care plan	Compliant/cooperative
They have a different understanding of their experience (explain alternative understanding)	No-insight/lacks insight
Requires additional support with (identify tasks)	Low functioning
Struggling to have their needs met	Manipulative/attention seeking/ staff splitting
Finding it difficult to accept support and expressing the need to be independent	Rejecting help
Consumer, participant, client (or preferred term that implies self-determination in recovery journey)	Patient (when used in the context of mental ill-health and service provision)
Acknowledging the impact of trauma on an individual's behaviour or response	Stigmatising behavioural responses to trauma
A person who is frequently seeking help	Institutionalised, dependent on services, frequent flyers
Various needs that need to be met and may require additional support	Complex case
They are experiencing an escalating emotional state that leads to (describe behaviour)	Aggressive/violent

To help you choose which words to use, we recommend utilising this guide in conjunction with the *Our Words Matter: Guidelines for language use*. For more detail and context, click on this link or visit mindframe.org.au/our-words-matterguidelines-for-language-use to access the guidelines (including references) in full.