MENTAL HEALTH

Language Matters

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Learning how to talk about suicide in a hopeful, respectful way has the power to save lives.

Choosing our words carefully is about more than avoiding stigmatizing terms. The language we use can also have a positive effect, which makes choosing the right words just as important as avoiding the wrong ones.

The topic of suicide should be approached with care and compassion. Whether we are engaging in a dialogue, talking to someone with lived experience or writing about the issue in a professional setting, being mindful of our language is not just about being politically correct. It's about saving lives.

As our knowledge and understanding of suicide evolves, the way we talk about it must evolve as well. To help you be more conscious of your own language decisions, this guide will show you how to avoid reinforcing the stigma that prevents people from seeking help when they need it most.

While there are specific terms and phrases to avoid when speaking about suicide and mental illness, these general rules can help you choose your words more carefully.

Avoid:

- Anything that reinforces stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination against people with mental illness and suicidal ideation.
- Anything that implies mental illness makes people more creative, fragile or violent.
- Anything that refers to or defines people by their diagnosis.

Try to:

- Be direct. We know that talking to someone about suicide won't cause or increase suicidal thoughts, or cause the person to act on them. It can help them feel less isolated and scared.
- Be hopeful. People can and do get better.
- Encourage people to seek help.

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Tips to reduce mental health and wellbeing stigma

1 **Foster a positive mental health and wellbeing attitude.**

Your attitude, and the way you talk about (or don't talk about) mental health and wellbeing can impact how comfortable your members feel about speaking up about mental health and wellbeing issues, or seeking help within your club.

Some ways to foster a helpful attitude towards mental health issues, are to:

- Read a range of literature, listen to podcasts, or watch programs on information and/or lived experience of mental health issues.
- Practice withholding judgement and listening with empathy and an open mind when mental health and wellbeing issues are discussed.
- Role model a positive, understanding, and supportive attitude no matter your personal beliefs.
- Proactively and respectively challenge assumptions, misconceptions, and misinformation when you notice it in yourself or others.

2 **Encourage constructive conversations.**

Promote open and respectful discussions about mental health and wellbeing issues, challenging any stigmatising or derogatory language.

3 **Mental health and wellbeing awareness education**

Use a range of communication and engagement channels (such as information seminars, guest speakers with a professional background, informational multimedia, and fact sheets) to help the community understand the prevalence of mental health and wellbeing issues, and provide informed and accurate information.

To find an appropriately trained and supported lived experience guest speaker, contact the **Consumers of Mental Health WA (CoMHWA).**

4 **Demonstrate supporting others**

Provide support to those experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues, and encourage others to do the same. Remember to respect boundaries and privacy when supporting others.

**5** **Use evidence-based resources and services**

Ensure that any presenters or guest speakers are appropriately qualified and trained to talk in a safe manner following best practice. It is essential that mental health issues are discussed in a safe, professional, and respectful manner. Invite a safe, evidenced-based and professional organisation to talk to members or present at any event you run.

The **Assessment Criteria for External Mental Health Programs and Service Providers** is a tool available to help decide whether an organisation is suitable to engage.

5 **Use safe terminology**

The language we use when discussing mental health and wellbeing can have a significant impact on how individuals perceive and approach mental health. As such, using appropriate and respectful terminology is one of the strategies that you can use to help reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help and support.
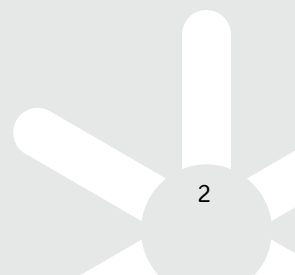
Check out the below guide for recommended language and phrases to avoid when discussing mental health and wellbeing.

Instead of this...	... Say this	The reasons why
Commit/committed suicide	Died by suicide / death by suicide / lost their life to suicide	The word "commit" implies suicide is a sin or crime, reinforcing the stigma that it's a selfish act and personal choice using neutral phrasing like "died by suicide" helps strip away the shame/blame element
Successful/unsuccessful suicide completed/failed suicide	Died by suicide / survived a suicide attempt / lived through a suicide attempt / fatal suicidal behaviour / non-fatal suicidal behaviour / fatal suicide attempt / non-fatal suicide attempt	The notion of a "successful" suicide is inappropriate because it frames a very tragic outcome as an achievement or something positive to be matter-of-fact, a suicide attempt is either fatal or not
Epidemic, skyrocketing	Rising, increasing	Words like "epidemic" can spark panic, making suicide seem inevitable or more common than it actually is by using purely quantitative, less emotionally charged terms like "rising", we can avoid instilling a sense of doom or hopelessness
<Name> is suicidal	<Name> is facing suicide / is thinking of suicide / has suffered through suicidal thoughts / has experienced suicidal thoughts	We don't want to define someone by their experience with suicide; they are more than their suicidal thoughts
He's suicidal	He is facing suicide / thinking of suicide / experiencing suicidal thoughts	Putting the condition before the person reduces someone's identity to their diagnosis— people aren't their illness; they have an illness
They're a schizophrenic	They have schizophrenia / are living with schizophrenia	
The mentally ill	People with mental illness	People-first language shows respect for the individual, reinforcing the fact that their condition does not define them
<Substance> addicts	People addicted to <substance>, people with addiction	

In an Emergency Dial 000

For support call Lifeline 13 11 14

or visit **thinkmentalhealthwa.com.au** for more information