Safer Language Guide

Prioritizing inclusive and stigma-free language.

Guiding Principles:
Safer Language Guide

At Jack.org, we're all about staying true to our mission and values when it comes to working with youth and stakeholders. When delivering mental health promotion education, it is crucial that we prioritize accurate, inclusive, and stigma-free language.

Stigmatizing vs Respectful Language

A lot of stigmatizing language is normalized in our day-to-day vocabulary, especially when it comes to mental illness.

To ensure stigmatizing language is not used when writing, consider consulting the Mental Health Commission of Canada's reference guide and resources below to determine whether the language you are using is respectful or not:

Reference Guide

Stigmatizing	Respectful
It drives me **crazy**.	it **bothers/annoys/frustrates** me.
This is **nuts**.	This is **interesting/strange/peculiar/funny.**
This individual **suffers** from depression	They **live with/are experiencing** depression
Mentally ill or **insane** person	person **living with a mental health problem** or **illness**
Committed suicide, **successful** suicide	**Died** by suicide
Failed or **unsuccessful** suicide attempt	**Attempted** suicide
Substance **abuse**	Substance **use** or substance **use disorder**
Everyone who is a **junkie**...	Everyone who **uses substances**...
They used to be an **addict**.	They are **in recovery**.

Mental Health Commission of Canada, Language Matters (2020).

Person-First vs Identity-First Language

Person-first language prioritizes the person before the diagnosis, describing what condition a person "has" rather than asserting what a person "is." It focuses on the individual while de-emphasizing the illness, disability, or condition, e.g. a person who lives with schizophrenia. Person-first language is often preferred when it comes to talking about mental illness.

Some people choose to use identity-first language, which puts the condition before the person, e.g. a schizophrenic person. How a person chooses to identify is up to them.

🗎 **Language Matters | Mental Health Commission of Canada →**

🗎 **Person-First Language and Recovery | Mental Health America →**

Asking About Pronouns in a Safe Way

When asking someone about their pronouns, it's crucial to approach the subject in a respectful and safe way. The first step is to establish an environment where the individual feels at ease sharing their pronouns. This can be achieved by sharing your own pronouns, introducing yourself with your pronouns, or simply asking if they feel comfortable sharing their pronouns.

It's important to avoid making pronoun sharing a **mandatory** activity and **never force someone to share their pronouns**, especially if it could lead to an unsafe situation, such as being outed to an unsafe group of people.

Checking Biases

To ensure that everyone feels respected, it's important to acknowledge that a person's pronouns may not align with their perceived gender identity. It's crucial to respect a person's pronoun choices and use them accurately, even if they don't fit into the traditional gender binary, where the pronouns "he" or "she" are exclusively used.

Tip: Using gender-neutral pronouns like they/them may take some getting used to, but referring to people by their correct pronouns even when they're not present can help you develop the habit and avoid misgendering someone.

Navigating Mistakes

Mistakes can happen when it comes to pronouns. If you use the wrong pronoun, it's important to apologize and correct yourself, and then move on. Avoid making a big deal out of the mistake or drawing attention to the person's gender identity in a way that could be uncomfortable or embarrassing for them.

    5