



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
*Mental health for all*

# WORDS CAN HURT:

## A guide to sensitive language related to mental illnesses and substance use

This guide is a call to reflect on how we talk about mental and substance use health difficulties. Using sensitive, accurate language can help lessen negative judgments that still surround these very common life experiences and make it more likely that people will get the help they deserve.

This guide also highlights words that get thrown around – often without intention to harm – in everyday language. Because of their association with mental health and substance use, even the casual use of these terms can worsen the stigma faced by people living with a mental illness or substance use disorder.

Please see [cmha.ca/brochure/wordsmatter](https://cmha.ca/brochure/wordsmatter) for more information.

Potentially harmful language	Instead, consider using...	Why it matters
Using: crazy, insane, nuts, psycho, schizo, wacko, etc. as descriptors, e.g. “she’s acting crazy” or “that’s insane”	A different descriptive word that isn’t associated with mental illness (e.g., unusual, strange, peculiar, etc.)	Even if not intended to be hurtful, descriptors like “crazy,” which are historically associated with mental illness, can contribute to stigma faced by people experiencing mental health difficulties.
He/she/they are ... mentally ill, bipolar, schizophrenic, psychotic, etc.	A person who has, or is experiencing, or is living with a mental illness, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, etc.	A person’s mental health is only one aspect of who they are. Use person-first language and avoid labels like “mentally ill” or “schizophrenic.” We don’t use “cancerous” to describe someone with cancer. People are individuals and are not defined by an illness.
Suffers with/from, the victim of ... (any mental illness)	A person who has a mental illness or is experiencing or living with a mental illness	Using the words “suffering” and “victim” in relation to mental illnesses can be demeaning and disempowering.

Potentially harmful language	Instead, consider using...	Why it matters
“I’m being so bipolar,” “I’m so OCD,” etc. (when used casually or in a flippant manner)	Different descriptive words that aren’t associated with a mental illness. (e.g. I feel down; I feel scattered)	Using mental illnesses casually to describe our feelings or behaviours can trivialize mental illnesses, and the experiences of those who live with them.
Committed suicide or successful suicide, unsuccessful or failed suicide	Died by suicide, lost their life to suicide, fatal suicide attempt and attempted suicide, survived/lived through a suicide attempt, non-fatal suicide attempt	<p>Suicide is not a crime nor is it a success, so avoid the expression “commit” suicide and “successful”/“unsuccessful” suicide.</p> <p>Neutral language like “died by suicide” can help reduce blame and shame surrounding suicide.</p>
Addict, alcoholic, junkie, or any other derogative term for someone experiencing addiction/a substance use disorder	A person with a substance use disorder, opioid use disorder, alcohol use disorder, an addiction, or a person experiencing problems with substance use, experiencing an alcohol or drug problem	<p>Labels like “addict” and “junkie” can encourage negative judgments and punishing approaches, rather than compassionate ones.</p> <p>Terms like “substance use disorder” make it clear that addiction is a medical condition that deserves treatment, rather than a personality or moral failing.</p> <p>Addiction is not a formal diagnosis but can be used as a synonym for substance use disorder.</p>
Drug user	A person who uses drugs/ substances	Person-first language centres the humanity of those being spoken about, rather than reducing them to a behaviour.

Potentially harmful language	Instead, consider using...	Why it matters
Drug/substance abuse, drug habit	Drug/substance use, regular drug/substance use, higher-risk drug/substance use, substance use disorder/addiction	When the word “abuse” is used, it implies that a person is guilty of misbehaviour. The word “habit,” in reference to a substance use disorder, can diminish how serious an illness it is.
Drug den	Overdose Prevention Site, Supervised Consumption Site, Safer Consumption Site	“Drug den” is misleading, stigmatizing, and factually inaccurate. It associates legal and proven health interventions with criminal and dangerous activity, reinforcing negative stereotypes about people who use drugs. Overdose prevention sites are effective in reducing the risk of death and connecting people with care and support. They do not encourage or promote drug use.

## Respect for individual preferences

Sometimes people disagree about the preferred language they use to describe themselves. A person with a substance use disorder or a mental illness may choose to refer to themselves using certain terms that could be considered offensive when others use them. This may be a positive way to claim identity, to cope with an illness or for another reason.

If you’re referring to someone else’s mental health or substance use, consider whether it’s actually relevant to the discussion, if they’d be comfortable with you doing so, and what term(s) they’d prefer you use. If you don’t know, a conversation with them is a place to start.

### Sources

- <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/stigma-why-words-matter-fact-sheet>
- <https://www.nih.gov/nih-style-guide/alcohol-substance-use>
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