



# More than words... language matters in mental health.

This document will raise your awareness of the language that will help you achieve better outcomes from conversations around emotional wellbeing.

Words and language matter because they are powerful and can trigger strong emotions. Words can also create a safe space for discussion and promote a culture that supports emotional health. There are words and phrases that may alienate those who are experiencing emotional distress, making it less likely that they'll be receptive to any support offered.

Take time to raise your awareness of the language that will help you achieve better outcomes from conversations around emotional wellbeing. Think about what you could REALLY be saying. Although it's often overlooked, the language we use conveys our thoughts, feelings, facts and information. When speaking to someone who may be experiencing difficulties with their emotional health, be attentive to what you say and ask yourself questions like:

- ◆ How do the words I have chosen reflect my attitude to this subject/person?
- ◆ How will someone else hear or read this?
- ◆ Am I communicating in an open, respectful and non-judgemental way?
- ◆ Am I acknowledging somebody else's right to be different?

## We can all do better... let's agree to avoid:



**Describing someone who is organised as "OCD"** – being clean, tidy and particular is not the same as living with mental ill health.



**Talking about being "bipolar"** when we experience everyday natural mood swings, is not the same as living with mental ill health.



**Using very problematic words like "psycho"** to describe a person we dislike or **"schizo"** to describe a person's reaction or personality, stigmatises people living with a psychotic illness.



**Describing someone who is thin as "anorexic"** misunderstands that Anorexia Nervosa is a mental health condition that is much more complex than just losing weight.

Here are some fundamentals to keep in mind:

### Do...

- ◆ refer to a 'person with mental ill health' or 'a person diagnosed with' 'a person experiencing mental ill health'
- ◆ use language that emphasises respect for their individual strengths and differences
- ◆ use language that conveys hope over someone's ability to restore their mental health.

### Don't...

- ◆ label people as 'mentally ill' or equate the person to their diagnosis
- ◆ emphasise their limitations arising from their current struggles
- ◆ don't sensationalise a mental illness by describing people as 'suffering from' or being 'a victim of' a condition.

Here are some examples of the fundamentals in action:

### Opt for phrases like:

- ◆ Sam lives with/has a mental illness
- ◆ Lucy has depression
- ◆ Mark has been diagnosed with bipolar
- ◆ Jordan has experienced anorexia
- ◆ Mohamad doesn't seem ready to go back to work.

### Avoid phrases such as:

- ◆ Sam is mentally ill
- ◆ Lucy is a depressive
- ◆ Mark is a bipolar
- ◆ Jordan is an anorexic
- ◆ Mohamad still isn't right in the head.

### Remember there are contrasting views

- ◆ Some people reject the labels of diagnosis, while others find them helpful. For example, someone may find a diagnosis stigmatising, but also essential when accessing benefits in the UK
- ◆ We often use the phrase 'mental illness' other people prefer the word distress
- ◆ Some people prefer the term mental ill-health.

### Discussing suicide

Discussing suicide can seem like a scary subject and it's OK to feel uncomfortable. Remember, you don't need to solve problems and can make a huge difference to someone by being supportive and using language that is calm and non-judgmental.

### Opt for phrases like:

- ◆ died by suicide
- ◆ ended their life
- ◆ attempted to end their life
- ◆ non-fatal attempt at suicide.

### Avoid phrases such as:

- ◆ committed suicide
- ◆ topped themselves
- ◆ unsuccessful suicide attempt
- ◆ failed suicide attempt
- ◆ attention seeking
- ◆ cry for help.



## Discussing emotional wellbeing

Many people lack confidence when it comes to having conversations about mental health. This guide will talk you through some simple steps you can follow, to give you the confidence to have a meaningful conversation about mental health.

Mental health is much more than the absence of mental illness. Changing the way we talk about mental health will encourage more people to discuss their emotional health openly. We all have emotional wellbeing needs, and it is important to be able to talk about them so that we can be supported in the right way.



### Prepare and set the scene

Choose an appropriate environment which is comfortable but also private and discrete. Think about a place where the risk of interruption or distraction is minimal. Put your mobile phone on silent so that you can be fully attentive within the conversation.

Don't think however that you have to wait for the 'perfect' moment, or place, or put yourself under too much pressure get things 'just right'. It's more important to have a conversation that feels natural and supportive.



### Set the tone

Take a non-judgemental approach, adopting an attitude of warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy. Thank the person for opening up and let them know you value what is being said. Try to normalise the person's experience e.g. 'It's understandable that

you feel this way, given what you've been through.' Try not to react with obvious shock to anything that is said. Make sure you set enough time aside, so you don't have to rush through the conversation.



### Be gentle and open

Practice keeping your body language open, and ask open questions. It helps to be factual rather than jumping to conclusions or making assumptions based on your own experiences e.g. saying 'You haven't answered my calls this week, which is not like you. Is everything okay?' is more helpful than 'It seems like you're avoiding me, what's going on?'.



### Use active listening

Listen attentively to what is being said, but also listen to someone's non-verbal cues and body language. Its okay to check twice with someone e.g 'You said that you are okay but you seem very quiet and distracted this week'.

Reflect back what the person is saying. This shows that you are hearing and understanding the impact of their experiences, and also checks you have heard the person correctly. This helps the person feel valued, seen and understood.

“Changing the way we talk about mental health will encourage more people to discuss their emotional health openly.”



### You don't need all the details and you don't have to be an expert

Don't think that you need to take on the role of a counsellor or therapist. You do not need to know everything that has happened, or have to resolve the issues and it is often best not to give personal advice on how to solve any problems. Instead be there to listen and encourage the person to get the support that they need. Encourage the person to engage in self-care, connect with others and seek professional support. The person's GP can often be a good starting point.



### Be sure to check back in

Make sure that you check back in with the person, and follow up after your conversation. Otherwise the person can be left questioning why they opened up to you. Arrange a date and time to get back in touch. Use this as an opportunity to see how the person is doing and whether they accessed any support needed e.g. 'How did your appointment with the GP go?'



For advice and support on your emotional wellbeing, visit:  
<https://www.nuffieldhealth.com/article/emotional-wellbeing-at-work>