

WORDS MATTER WHEN REFERRING TO MENTAL HEALTH

IT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE, WRITES MELANIE MCGREGOR



MELANIE MCGREGOR
Column

AND THE LIKE

Labelling someone by their mental health problem minimizes everything else about that person. Person-first language, such as "she has an addiction" rather than "she is an addict", recognizes that we are not defined by our mental health problems - we are all people with unique qualities and experiences first and foremost, and our language should reflect that.

Think about it - if someone has a physical health problem, we don't say "He is a migraine" or "She is back pain", and it should be the same for mental health.

'SUFFERS FROM'

Saying that people "suffer from depression" or "suffer from anxiety" can really minimize their resilience. While we want to recognize that mental health problems can be challenging, we also want to recognize that people have strengths and can recover and cope in positive ways.

People who have mental health problems can and do have meaningful and rewarding lives in which they are not always "suffering". Saying that someone is "liv-

ing with depression" or "living with anxiety" better reflects that recovery is possible and that each and every one of us can have positive mental health.

'JUST'

"He just has depression" and similar statements are often ways of dismissing what someone is experiencing, sometimes because we may not know what we can do to help.

It suggests that people living with mental health problems should be used to their symptoms and there is no reason for them to need help or support.

There is no "just" about it - we can all benefit from some compassion and support at some point, no matter where our mental health is at.

Our language can either judge and label or respect and include, so let's work towards making positive choices with our words.

Melanie McGregor is the communications and advancement specialist at the Canadian Mental Health Association Halton Region Branch, which provides mental health/addiction community support and education. Visit www.halton.cmha.ca for more information and follow @cmhahalton on Twitter.

Words are powerful, and the language we use makes a real difference when it comes to talking about mental health.

Even if we may not intend for someone to feel judged or labelled, we need to be intentional with our language and strive to be respectful, accepting, and inclusive.

So, what should we be mindful of and strive for when choosing our words? Following are some terms we should avoid in order to reduce minimization, stigma, and judgment.

'COMMIT SUICIDE'

The word "commit" is negatively loaded. We talk about "committing a crime" or "committing a sin", so when "commit" is coupled with "suicide", it carries judgment that people affected by suicide say makes them feel criticized and blamed.

The preferred language is to say that someone "died by suicide" or that someone "suicided".

'ADDICT, SCHIZOPHRENIC,'



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