

WORDS MATTER WHEN REFERRING TO MENTAL HEALTH

IT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE, WRITES MELANIE MCGREGOR



MELANIE MCGREGOR
Column

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,' 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 "living 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.

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EASY FLOOD RESPONSE FOR MILTON: PLANT MORE TREES

For more than a century, provincial tree-planting has cut flood risks in Ontario.

Rivers have surged over their banks this spring, flooding hundreds of homes, businesses and cottages. The Ottawa, Muskoka, French and Mattagami rivers (and many others) have flooded - and the risk now extends to lakes, as well.

"Forecast high winds ... will pose additional flood hazards along the shorelines of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario due to high water, wind driven storm surge and damages due to erosive wave action," read a late May warning from the province's flood forecasting system. While provincial funding cuts for flood work have been imposed on Ontario conservation authorities, 14 of them have issued flood warnings.

In the 1920s and 1930s, flooding was commonplace in Ontario. Edmund Zavitz, chief forester of Ontario a

century ago, traced the problem to deforestation. Settlers had cleared most of southern and eastern Ontario, leaving a bare-bones forest cover of about nine per cent. The Thames and Ganaraska watersheds were down to about four per cent forest cover. The indiscriminate clearing had stripped away some of the key features that absorb rainfall surges, such as swamps and wetlands along creeks. Deserts spread. Sand dunes engulfed orchards and roads. There was nothing to soak up the rain, and flash floods multiplied.

Zavitz offered a simple solution; plant trees, he said.

Tree roots hold back riverbanks and prevent erosion. Trees act as sponges, soaking up rainwater; the trees release water into the atmosphere through what's called transpiration. This is a benefit of sufficient forest cover.

Forests Ontario, the

tree-planting and forest education charity, has planted large quantities of trees across the province in the past 12 years. In the Milton region, over 150 landowners have benefited from the 50 Million Tree Program. Of the over 27 million trees planted provincewide since 2008, 308,887 have been in the Milton region.

Government support through the 50 Million Tree Program has kept down the price of trees, encouraging private landowners to turn fields into forests. These afforestation programs benefit us all, because they reduce the risk of floods and erosion.

In its April budget, the government of Premier Doug Ford cut the funding for Ontario's 50 Million Tree Program. The Ford government may think enough trees have been planted, but an ever-growing number of Ontarians disagree.

ROB KEEN, RPF
CEO, FORESTS ONTARIO

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