

Guide to Avoiding Stigmatizing Language

How to discuss suicide and behavioral/mental health terms

What is stigma?

Labeling and stereotyping that leads to status loss and discrimination for the stigmatized.

THEME	PROBLEMATIC	PREFERRED
BEHAVIORAL & MENTAL HEALTH	<p>Mentally ill, dangerously mentally ill, mental defective</p> <p><i>These terms label a person by their illness and do not make a distinction between the person and the illness; a person is more than their mental illness. The word “dangerous” is also stigmatizing and not a clinical word.</i></p>	<p>Person <u>with</u> mental illness, person with serious (severe) mental illness</p> <p><i>These terms have the same intended meaning but without the stigma or judgement; these terms do not label individuals by their illness but rather use person-first language.</i></p>
	<p>Substance abuser, addict, drug addict</p> <p><i>These terms label a person by their illness and do not make a distinction between the person and the illness, they also imply permanency; a person is more than their substance use.</i></p>	<p>Person with substance use disorder (SUD), substance misuse, inappropriate or problem or risky use</p> <p><i>These terms have the same intended meaning but without the stigma or judgement; these terms do not label individuals by their illness but rather use person-first language; SUD is a clinical diagnosis that is diagnosed when a person’s substance use causes distress or harm.</i></p>
	<p>Alcohol abuser, alcoholic</p> <p><i>These terms label a person by their illness and do not make a distinction between the person and the illness, they also imply permanency; a person is more than their alcohol use.</i></p>	<p>Person with alcohol use disorder (AUD), person experiencing an alcohol problem</p> <p><i>These terms have the same intended meaning but without the stigma or judgement; these terms do not label individuals by their illness but rather use person-first language; AUD is a clinical diagnosis that is diagnosed when a person’s drinking causes distress or harm.</i></p>
SUICIDE	<p>Committed suicide</p> <p><i>This conflates suicide with being a crime or criminal behavior, a holdover from when many states classified suicide as a felony.</i></p>	<p>Died by suicide, took their own life, ended their own life</p> <p><i>These phrases are factual without the implication of criminality or other judgment.</i></p>
	<p>Successful suicide</p> <p><i>Successful sounds like a desired or positive outcome.</i></p>	<p>Suicide death, suicide</p> <p><i>Removing “successful” relays the facts without glamorization.</i></p>
	<p>Failed suicide, failed attempt</p> <p><i>Failed has a negative connotation and glamorizes suicide attempts.</i></p>	<p>Suicide attempt, non-fatal attempt</p> <p><i>Removing “failed” relays the facts without glamorization.</i></p>