

Language: A Mental Health Primer by Harold A. Maio and Sandy Naiman.

Twelve Things Everybody Can Do To Help Heal Our Damaging Public Discourse And Promote Mental Health

1. Avoid the verbs "are" and "is." He "is" mentally ill or they "have" schizophrenia.
2. Avoid labeling people "schizophrenics," and "a" "schizophrenic" - it's offensive.
3. Use the verbs, "has," "have," and name the illnesses specifically - a bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, an anxiety disorder.
4. Avoid all adjectives that label people and instead, use substantives - name the individual conditions - i.e. schizophrenia. Diagnoses are a form of label.
5. Use "person-first" language, as in "people with..." or "a person with..." and always name the specific illness.
6. Avoid the article "the" as in "mentally ill" or "homeless".
7. Avoid the ubiquitous singular - "mental illness".
8. Use the plural, "mental illnesses," as there are many.
9. Avoid the abstract, "mental illness," if you can informatively use a specific diagnosis. If not, "psychiatric condition" is more accurate, since "mental illness" is a social construction.
10. Avoid the nonspecific "stigma". It is a negated-negative, a literary term called a "praeteritio." *"Don't think about a short-necked pink giraffe."* What comes to mind? A short-necked pink giraffe, though no such animal exists.

"Stigma" has several meanings. In Ancient Greece, slaves and criminals were literally branded with a hot poker to be made visible to the populace. Not unlike the yellow stars people of a certain religion were forced to wear during Nazi Germany. "Stigma" means brand or sore. It is now used almost exclusively with mental health. It automatically, unfairly and erroneously victimizes a person diagnosed with a psychiatric condition. A person DOES NOT have stigma. Society does. Society has been branded by fear and ignorance.

The word "stigma" is no longer used as a medical term, but it brings dishonour and is a cause of shame, reproach or discredit to people with psychiatric conditions. It should no longer be used in either educational institutions, by governments or the media because it promotes discrimination. Instead, use the word "prejudice" (negative thinking) which can be concretely addressed because it *causes* discrimination (unjust treatment of certain groups of people), *creates* negative bias and *promotes* negative stereotyping.
11. Avoid repeating "myths." They are well known and false.
12. Learn the truths and become an agent of change - inform and educate anyone who will listen.

Read Sandy's bi-weekly blog "Coming Out Crazy" for *The Toronto Star* at <http://thestar.blogs.com/mentalhealth>