



The Power of Words

What we say about a topic, how we say it and our choice of words in addressing a topic is significant. Words are a powerful tool and careful consideration needs to be given to the words we choose to use and speak. Many have become accustomed to using certain terms, unaware of the potential negative impact those chosen words may have. Some terms and expressions are rooted in history and over time have become the common place or 'accepted' terms we use in addressing the topics of suicide and mental illness.

Historic Language	Preferred Language	Information
Committed suicide	To remove any criminal implications, the current preferred terms are: death by suicide, suicided, or suicide death	"Committed suicide", is a carryover from the Middle Ages, when suicide was considered both illegal and sinful by the laws and religions of the time. The word "commit" continues today to imply that suicide is a criminal offence, creating issues and concern for family and friends. Suicide, however, is not a criminal offence in Canada.
Successful suicide	The current terms which better reflect the tragedy of suicide are: death by suicide, suicided, or suicide death	The term "successful" when used to describe a suicide death does not reflect the reality experienced by family and friends. Every suicide death is a tragedy, not a success. The preferred terms are non-judgmental and are also consistent with how we describe other types of death.
Failed suicide Unsuccessful suicide Incomplete suicide	Less judgemental terms which appropriately reflect the situation are: "non-fatal suicide attempt" or "suicide attempt"	To describe a suicide attempt that does not result in death as a "failure", minimizes the value of the individual – each of these terms imply that the person who attempted suicide is a failure. In fact, a suicide attempt that does not result in death gives the person the opportunity to find help and hope.
Crazy Wacko Loonie Nuts Schizo	The preferred address is: 'a person living with' schizophrenia or a person with bipolar The illness is recognized as one aspect of who the person is rather than becoming the label for who they are.	These terms are focused on perception of behaviour and are not respectful of the person. For those already diagnosed with an illness these terms are demeaning and hurtful. Such terms also create apprehension and fear among those who may need to seek out support and help but avoid doing so because of the negative manner in which they may be labeled. Referring to an individual as schizophrenic or bipolar minimizes the individual as a human being; it focuses solely on their illness rather than recognizing them as a person first.
Suffering from...schizophrenia, depression	The preferred address is: 'a person living with' schizophrenia or a person with bipolar	Using 'living with' an illness imparts a message of recovery and competence. Using terms such as 'suffering' from assumes a negative impact of the illness on a person's life and can lead others to anticipate a need to 'save' a person from their suffering rather than supporting personal growth and recovery.

For information contact: Achieve Mental Health Wellness & Recovery Centre 519-428-0580 x 5 or 1-877-909-4357 x 5
Guest speakers are available to present to your organization, group or class by contacting the Centre



CAMHS

Community Addiction and Mental Health
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