香港城市精神健康聯盟
City Mental Health Alliance HK

HOW LANGUAGE CAN HELP TACKLE MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA IN THE WORKPLACE

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA?

Stigma is any negative attitude, prejudice or false belief associated with certain traits - often leading to discrimination or marginalisation. Three elements have been identified as the key sources of mental health stigma[1], comprising:

- problems of knowledge, such as ignorance or misinformation;
- problems of attitude, such as prejudice; and
- problems of behaviour, such as discrimination.

These problem areas may in turn negatively influence the choice of words that are used to label and discuss mental health related topics.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TACKLE STIGMA?

According to a 2023 study by Mind HK[2] which surveyed 1,014 individuals:

- **47%** would not be willing to live near someone struggling with their mental health

- **1 in 4** would be willing to end a friendship with someone diagnosed with a mental health condition

- **44%** believe that a 'lack of discipline and willpower' is the main cause of mental ill health

- **55%** have experienced or know someone who experienced the stigma around mental health struggles

Mental health stigma may prevent individuals who are experiencing mental-ill health from disclosing or sharing their challenges for fear of judgement or isolation. This could lead to lower self-esteem, difficulty concentrating at work and reluctance to seek treatment. Stigma could be further exacerbated in more structured and formal environments such as workplaces. The most recent **CMHA HK Employee Wellbeing Survey** found that

stigma remains one of the key areas to address in workplaces, and that only 50% of employees reported that they spoke with someone at work about their mental health.

HOW CAN OUR USE OF LANGUAGE INFLUENCE STIGMA?

The way we use language plays a big role in either perpetuating or breaking down mental health stigma. Communicating to employees in an inclusive way is key to fostering a non-stigmatising approach towards mental health and creating a psychologically safe workplace.

Inclusive communication ensures that all employees feel valued, respected and a sense of belonging. More work needs to be done to educate the public and to debunk myths around mental health. Whether it be in the context of internal company communications or casual verbal exchanges between colleagues, mindful use of language can have a significant positive impact on promoting workplace inclusion.

[1] Brohan, E., Slade, M., Clement, S. et al. Experiences of mental illness stigma, prejudice and discrimination: a review of measures. BMC Health Serv Res 10, 80 (2010).
[2] Mind HK and the Social Policy Research Limited, 2023

USE OF MENTAL HEALTH LANGUAGE: PRACTICAL TIPS

PREFERRED LANGUAGE	REFRAIN FROM/ DON'T USE	WHY?
'Died by suicide' 'Killed him/herself'	'Committed suicide' 'Successful suicide'	Suicide should not be associated with success, failure or criminality Refrain from labelling an individual with their mental illness. A person's mental health is only a part of who they are and does not define them.
A person (diagnosed/living) with [a mental health condition]	Describing a person as 'a schizophrenic' or 'an anorexic'	Refrain from labelling an individual with their mental illness. A person's mental health is only a part of who they are and does not define them.
If the person has a diagnosed mental health condition, use proper terminology to reflect and explain the diagnosis	Calling a person 'psycho', 'crazy', 'mad', 'deranged', 'lunatic', 'insane'	Certain words reinforce mental health stigma by sensationalising ideas and inaccurately reflecting the mental health condition a person is experiencing
Avoid making simplistic or incorrect links between mental ill-health and violence	Using words like 'dangerous', 'unhinged' or 'unpredictable' to label mental illness	Substance misuse and socio-demographic stressors are primary factors influencing violence rather than solely by a mental health condition
The person's behaviour was unusual or erratic	Casually using clinical terms like OCD, PTSD, schizophrenic to describe a person's behaviour when not applied to a diagnosable condition	Accurate use of clinical terms is important to prevent trivialisation of conditions or perpetuation of stigma
Antidepressants, mental health professionals, mental health hospital	Using terms like 'happy pills', 'shrinks', 'mental institution'	Such colloquialisms could trivialise the topic and undermine an individual's willingness to seek help

KEY TAKEAWAY

We all have a choice around the words that we use. The use of appropriate terminology can help to reinforce the fact that mental health disorders can be treated and managed, and that an individual is not defined by their mental health.

We can tackle stigma by equipping ourselves with information and knowledge of inclusive language practices and reflecting on our behaviour and attitudes in the context of mental health communications. Being more mindful, inclusive and accurate with our language can be a first and significant step towards reducing mental health stigma.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- Brohan, E., Slade, M., Clement, S. et al. Experiences of mental illness stigma, prejudice and discrimination: a review of measures. BMC Health Serv Res 10, 80 (2010)

- Mind HK Media Guidelines: Reporting on Mental Health Conditions (English)

- Language and Stigma, Everymind

- Why the language we use to discuss mental health matters, Everymind at Work

- Language Do's and Dont's, Canadian Mental Health Association

- Volkow, N.D., Gordon, J.A. & Koob, G.F. Choosing appropriate language to reduce the stigma around mental illness and substance use disorders. Neuropsychopharmacol. 46, 2230–2232 (2021)

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