Words Matter

Destigmatizing Language Worksheet

Worksheet | Mental Health Anti-Stigma | PSP | PSP Leaders | 10 min read

How to use this worksheet

This worksheet can be used during training, team meetings, coaching conversations, or personal reflection to develop respectful, stigma-reducing language in the workplace. It supports psychological health and safety by helping individuals and teams communicate with dignity and accuracy.

Why Do Words Matter?

Language is how we express values, meaning and understanding. The way we talk about mental health, substance use, and suicide has a powerful impact. Using respectful, accurate language helps reduce stigma and promotes dignity. We can empower ourselves and others by using person-first language (e.g., "a person living with schizophrenia") rather than defining people by their condition (e.g., "a schizophrenic"). In some communities, identity-first language (e.g., "autistic person") is preferred, especially when it reflects cultural or personal identity. The key is to listen and respect how individuals describe themselves.

How To Practice

1. **Practice Person-First Language:** Focus on the individual, not the diagnosis (e.g., "person with depression" instead of "they are depressed").
2. **Be Mindful of Identity Preferences:** Some people may prefer identity-first language — ask or listen for cues.
3. **Use in Conversations and Writing:** Apply respectful language in professional settings, documentation, and everyday interactions.
4. **Educate Others:** Share the guide with colleagues, students, or community members to promote inclusive communication.
5. **Reflect and Adjust:** If you catch yourself using outdated or stigmatizing terms, correct yourself and learn from it.

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Adapted from: Language Matters Poster – Mental Health Commission of Canada

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Practice Sheet

Review the stigmatizing phrases below and offer respectful alternatives. For instance:

- Replace "addict" with "person in recovery" or "person with a substance use disorder."
- Avoid terms like "crazy" or "nuts," and use more neutral or descriptive language like "overwhelmed" or "going through a tough time."

Stigmatizing	Respectful
They are crazy	They are going through a tough time
They are bipolar	They have bipolar disorder
They are off their meds again	
They is psycho	
They are depressed	
They are schizophrenic	
I am so OCD	
Substance abuse	
They committed suicide	
I am an addict	
They are mentally ill	