

Talking about Mental Health

- **Be positive.** Choose the positive over the negative (for instance, talk about people “experiencing” or “living with” mental health problems, not “suffering” from them). Avoid words which sensationalise the issues or put people in the position of victims.
- **People first!** Remember that people are people first and foremost. Like everyone else, people with mental problems have many aspects to who they are and should not be ‘labelled’ by one characteristic or experience. So, for instance, it’s better not to call someone “a schizophrenic”, but someone “with a diagnosis of schizophrenia”.

Things to think about

Here are some broad definitions and general reflections on phrases used when talking about mental health issues:

Words	Things to think about
Patient, sufferer, victim etc.	Words which victimise or ‘medicalise’ people with mental health problems are increasingly contentious. More neutral terms, like ‘person with a mental health problem’ are preferred.
A schizophrenic, a depressive etc.	Labelling people solely by a psychiatric diagnosis is increasingly seen as narrow and stigmatising. Terms like ‘person with schizophrenia’ are preferred.
People with mental health problems	Generally, this refers to people with a diagnosed condition, or for whom problems with their mental health are having a significant impact of their lives.
Mental illness	Implies a severe, diagnosed and enduring condition. Some people think the definition of ‘illness’ is useful, as it recognises biological factors and can reduce a sense of ‘blame’ around mental health problems. Others see it as too narrow, and believe it discourages us from thinking about the range of influences on a person’s life. For this reason, they may prefer to talk about mental or emotional distress.

Mental distress/ people experiencing mental distress	Not a familiar term to the general public – but an alternative to ‘mental health problems’ which is preferred by some people because it is more inclusive.
Disorder/ mental health disorder	Some people feel these ‘medicalised’ terms imply a judgement on people with mental health problems.
Service users/ users/ mental health service users	Generally used within the mental health sector. Can be a useful way of describing people who access mental health services.
Survivor/ mental health survivor	A term preferred and used by some organisations and activists to describe and celebrate people who have ‘survived’ the mental health system.

Taken from Stop the Stigma: a local action pack to stop the stigma surrounding mental health, mindout for mental health/Department of health, 2003 (no longer in publication)