

# DOS + DON'TS OF TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Words matter, and being conscious of the words we use when talking about mental health can help foster open and honest conversations and help to end the stigma.

Check out these 10 tips of dos and don'ts that can help you talk about mental health in a way that is both respectful and kind:

## DO:

### 1. Do use person-centered language.

Remember that a diagnosis is only part of a person's life and is not the defining characteristic. Person-centered language puts the person first, not the diagnosis. For example, instead of saying, "He is schizophrenic," you can instead say, "He is living with/has been diagnosed with schizophrenia."

### 2. Do listen and believe someone who talks about their mental health.

If someone chooses to trust you with their feelings, listen to what they have to say without interruption, skepticism, or judgment. Sometimes all a person needs to feel better is someone else to listen to what they're going through. Nodding your head and using phrases like, "I understand," can let someone know that you're actively listening.

### 3. Do validate a person's lived experience and affirm their feelings.

Everyone's lived experience with mental health will be different, and no one's experience is wrong. It's important to reaffirm someone's feelings and emotions when they're talking about their mental health. Phrases like "I can understand how frustrating that must be," can let someone know that what they feel is valid.

### 4. Do offer resources if someone needs it.

Recommending one or two mental health resources to someone if they are struggling can help encourage them to seek support. Check out our resource list for suggestions!

### 5. Do own up to your mistake if you make one.

We're all still learning about the best way to have conversations about mental health, and we might make some mistakes along the way. That's OK! If you accidentally use language you shouldn't use when talking about mental health, apologize for the mistake, forgive yourself for making it, and learn from the experience.

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## DON'T:

### 1. Don't use insensitive language to describe people who are experiencing a mental illness.

Terms like "crazy," "insane," "lunatic," and "psycho" are stigmatizing words that put down people struggling with their mental health. Try to also avoid using these terms to describe everyday situations. As an example, instead of using the phrase, "My day has been crazy," you can use the phrase, "My day has been wild/intense/interesting/challenging."

### 2. Don't use terms that imply pity or suggests a person with a particular condition suffers.

People with mental health issues are able to live fulfilling, healthy lives, and the word "suffering" can imply someone is unwell and unhappy. In the place of "suffering from," you can use the phrase, "living with." For example, instead of saying, "She is suffering from bipolar disorder," say, "She is living with bipolar disorder."

### 3. Don't make judgments about people based on their diagnosis or shame them for their diagnosis.

It's a complete myth that people who live with mental illness are more violent, aggressive, or irrational. Remember that people are not their diagnoses, and it takes bravery to share details of one's diagnosis with others.

### 4. Don't use diagnostic or mental health terms to explain everyday behaviors or habits.

For example, saying you're "so OCD" because you like your books organized a certain way can be disrespectful to those who have actually been diagnosed with OCD.

### 5. Don't talk about suicide without also talking about resources to get help.

Talking about mental health can encourage those having thoughts about suicide to reach out and seek out help. This is why it's so important to know available resources and identify people to turn to if someone needs urgent help. You can learn about available resources here. (As a note, when talking about suicide, avoid the term "committed suicide" as it refers to the outdated notion that suicidal acts are crimes. Instead, use "died by suicide.")