

Mental health challenges are nothing to be ashamed of. It is a medical diagnosis, just like heart disease or diabetes. Mental health diagnoses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior (or a combination of these). **Mental health** is associated with emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which affects how a person thinks, feels, and acts. It is also a factor in how an individual handles stress, relates to others, and in making choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. It's critical that we talk about these challenges and that we do so in a **person-centered way**.

REFRAMING LANGUAGE

WHY CHANGING OUR THINKING, OUR ACTIONS, AND OUR LANGUAGE MATTERS



The terms we use to describe mental health challenges matter. We have all heard derogatory terms used to describe someone who has a mental health challenge. Here are a few to jog your memory: Cuckoo; Mad as a hatter; Screwy—having a screw loose; Bananas; Loopy; Crackers; Wacko (whacko); Loony; Insane; Nuts; Freak; Psycho, Crazy; Weirdo. Can you imagine mocking someone with a diagnosis such as cancer or heart disease? **Here's how we can do better.**



UPDATED LANGUAGE

Prejudice and discrimination

Acceptance

Experiencing or living with a mental health challenge

Experiences/has been diagnosed with emotional, mental, and/or behavioral health challenges

Person experiencing / living with or diagnosed with a mental health challenge

Person who experiences substance use challenges



OUTDATED LANGUAGE

Stigma

Awareness

Suffering from a Mental Illness

Emotionally Disturbed

Mentally Ill Person; referring to someone with a diagnosis as schizophrenic, bipolar, OCD, etc.

Drug Abuser, Alcoholic, Addict, Substance Abuse



WHY IT MATTERS

Prejudice refers to thinking, discrimination refers to action—both can be changed.

Being aware doesn't call for action, change in behavior, or thinking.

People who experience mental health challenges can and do live healthy, fulfilling lives. Suffering implies one is unwell, unhappy, or can't recover.

Being diagnosed, experiencing symptoms of, or having been diagnosed with a mental illness is a common part of the human experience. The term disturbed perpetuates prejudice and creates a barrier to treatment.

Certain language exaggerates mental illness and reinforces prejudice. Always use person-first language.

Avoid words that suggest a lack of quality of life for people with substance use concerns. Terms like addict reduce a person's identity, deny dignity/humanity and imply powerlessness or the inability to recover.

The importance of using person-first language when talking about mental health and substance use challenges cannot be overstated. This is true for members of the media, support and treatment professionals, family members, friends, and the community at large. Person-first language separates the individual from the symptoms they experience—maintaining their identity as people with strengths who have the power to recover. **Here are a few examples.**

Person-first phrases

- A person living with a mental health challenge
- A person with substance use challenges
- My son diagnosed with bipolar disorder
- My daughter experiencing schizophrenia
- The individual I'm supporting who is experiencing depression
- My father who experiences alcohol misuse

Phrases that hinder recovery

- The mentally ill, psycho, crazy, lunatic
- Addict, meth head, burnout, druggie, junkie
- My son is bipolar
- My schizo daughter
- A depressed individual
- My alcoholic father



Experiencing Mental Health Symptoms that Interfere with Daily Life/Activities

Died by Suicide

Person in Recovery

The Family Support Workforce includes family peers, clinicians, and others who support families

Family peer support (FPS) is provided from one family member with lived experience as a primary caregiver to another caregiver in the effort to strengthen the whole family's well-being. FPS will assist family caregivers in navigating child, adult and family serving systems



Emotional breakdown, Nervous breakdown

Committed Suicide; Completed Suicide

Former Addict; Former Alcoholic; Drunk

Professionals and Family Peer Specialists separates family peer support professionals from others

Peer Support This term is more typically associated with adult peers.



Using terms that don't acknowledge an individual's symptoms perpetuates avoidance of needed support that promote recovery.

The term committed is associated with a crime. The term completed suggests an accomplishment.

Emphasize strengths and the ability to recover, not limitations.

The Family Peer workforce should be thought of as professional and a respected career choice as much as clinicians, care managers, etc.

There are specific differences between adult peers and family peers. They have different lived and systems navigation experience.

Guidance for Choosing Language to Refer to Black and African American Populations

In the behavioral health field, the words we use to refer to individuals, families, communities, and cultures are enormously important. When words have been used in ways that deny the power, worth, or individuality of human beings, they tend to grow toxic, and they need to be replaced.

Here is a list of terms referring to African Americans that many people experience as appropriate and respectful, contrasted in the second column with outdated terms that are considered disrespectful. What constitutes “appropriate and respectful” shifts over time, and it varies from individual to individual, generation to generation, and group to group. No one can be expected to intuit what other people prefer to be called,

but we can all be expected to do our homework and to get clarification. As Aretha Franklin sang in Otis Redding’s **R-E-S-P-E-C-T**: “Find out what it means to me.”

When words have been used for centuries as weapons against an entire culture, searching carefully for more respectful language is not “political correctness.” It is an act of repair.



African American
Behavioral Health

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✓ RESPECTFUL	✗ DISRESPECTFUL	https://africanamericanbehavioralhealth.org
✓ African American	✗ Colored, Negro and Afro-American	The term “African American” can be used as either a noun or an adjective. It highlights the cultural heritage of individuals with ancestral ties to Africa. It is accurate to apply this term to any American Black person of African descent. The terms “Black” and “African American” are not interchangeable. Some individuals prefer the term “Black” because they do not identify as African or American, and some may not hold American citizenship.
✓ Biracial, multiracial	✗ mixed race	Do not use “mixed race” unless the individual prefers this term. Where possible, it is preferable to identify a person or a group’s racial heritages rather than using “biracial” or “multiracial.”
✓ Black	✗ Colored, Negro	“Black” is an adjective (Black community; Black man; Black women; Black-owned, etc.) and should never be used as a noun. Capitalize “Black” when using it as an adjective in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense, e.g., Black people, Black culture, Black colleges. In the U.S. context, the capitalization of “Black” acknowledges a shared identity, rather than skin color alone.
✓ Black communities, African Americans, Communities of color, Minority groups	✗ Minority, minorities	Do not use “minority” as a noun to refer to an individual or group (e.g., “they’re minorities”), because that usage is diminishing. “Minority” is appropriately used as an adjective to describe a group’s relative size in contrast to a majority group. Its accuracy depends on the context. Be sure to use the term accurately for the specific context and purpose, and not as a broad generalization.
✓ Economically Marginalized	✗ Underprivileged	“Underprivileged” is often looked at as intrinsically having less than, e.g., money, education and/or resources. “Economically marginalized” makes it clear that the marginalization is external, rather than a trait of the individual or the culture.
✓ Enslaved people	✗ slaves	Whereas “slave” refers to a role or identity, using “enslaved” draws attention to the external forces of oppression and trauma.
✓ People of color	✗ Colored People; Black, Indigenous, and people of color	“People of color” is a collective term for referring to non-white racial groups, and it emerged as a alternative to defaulting to “white” as the norm. The phrase is considered by some to be an inclusive and unifying frame across different racial groups. However, the term is non-specific and can serve to hide important differences, disparities, and identities among different racial groups, so many people of various races find it objectionable. It should be applied thoughtfully. Do not refer to an individual as a “person of color.” Instead, use their specific racial identity. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) is also seen by some as diminishing the experiences of some non-white races, and others may view it as confusing.

QUICK START GUIDE - STARTING WITH

Framing is the process of making choices about what to emphasize and what to leave unsaid. Here's a quick tour of themes to avoid and alternatives to advance

Why?

Try:	Instead of these words and cues:	This matters because:
Talking affirmatively about changing demographics: "As Americans live longer and healthier lives . . ."	"Tidal wave," "tsunami," and similarly catastrophic terms for the growing population of older people	Catastrophic language generates fears of irreparable doom and stifles motivation to work toward solutions. Focusing on realistic steps we can take to address the opportunities and challenges that comes from a growing population generates the momentum we seek.
Emphasizing how to improve social contexts: "Let's find creative solutions to ensure we can all thrive as we age."	"Choice," "planning," "control," and other individual determinants of aging outcomes	Individual language suggests that everyone has the same options and that making those choices leads to good outcomes. Recognizing that context, environment, socioeconomics and racial/ethnic identities influence outcomes differently allows us to talk about systemic options that will help us all.
Using neutral ("older people/Americans") and inclusive ("we" and "us") terms	"Seniors," "elderly," "aging dependents," and similar "other-ing" terms that stoke stereotypes	Inclusive language reflects the reality that we are all aging – there is no "them" and "they."
The Building Momentum metaphor: "Aging is a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge we can share with our communities."	"Struggle," "battle," "fight," and similar conflict-oriented words to describe aging experiences	Conflict-laden language generates fear and dread about aging, as though battling aging is the only path forward. Acknowledging that we continue to grow and change throughout the life course allows for engaging all of us in solutions as we all age.
Defining ageism: "Ageism is discrimination against older people due to negative and inaccurate stereotypes."	Using the word "ageism" without explanation	Clarity allows for discussion on an even foundation of understanding of the systemic societal bias against older adults.
Using concrete examples like intergenerational community centers to illustrate inventive solutions	Making generic appeals to the need to "do something" about aging	Offering specific solutions to specific challenges generates creativity and empowers action to benefit us all, along with recognizing that systemic solutions are possible and benefit us all.

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The Reframing Aging Initiative is a long-term social change endeavor designed to improve the public's understanding of what aging means and the many ways that older people contribute to our society. This greater understanding will counter ageism and guide our nation's approach to ensuring supportive policies and programs for us all as we move through the life course.

For more information, visit www.reframingaging.org



Language Guidance When Serving LGBTQ+ Populations

The Center of Excellence on LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity (CoE LGBTQ+ BHE) has created this language guidance related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) as a resource for behavioral health practitioners to better understand the most recent language used in LGBTQ+ communities. This list is not exhaustive, and we encourage professionals to gain a broader foundation on this knowledge by watching our foundational webinars **Sexual Orientation & Behavioral Health 101** and **Gender Identity, Expression & Behavioral Health 101**, available at: <https://lgbtqequality.org/learn/>. It should be noted that people use language in different ways, and the best practice is always to honor language an individual uses to identify themselves.

Updated Language	Outdated Language	Why It Matters
Transgender man or trans man, transgender woman or trans woman, transgender boy or trans boy, transgender girl or trans girl	Transgender male or transgender female	When asking questions about gender, use “man,” “boy,” and “woman” or “girl” over “male” and “female” because male and female are typically used to describe sex assigned at birth.
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer, Straight, etc.	Heterosexual or Homosexual	The term homosexual has a history of medicalization and has been used often as a derogatory term. As such, extend the same recommendation towards “heterosexual.”
Bisexual defined as attraction to more than one gender	Bisexual being defined as an attraction to “both men and women”	The outdated language incorrectly assumes that there are only two genders, when there are multiple genders. The best practice definition acknowledges that a Bi+ person may be attracted to more than one gender at a time, though not necessarily at the same time or in the same way.
Sexual orientation or gender identity	Lifestyle, choice, or preference	When referring to pronouns or identity, never use the word preference, lifestyle, or choice. It is dismissive to the lived experience of people who identify as LGBTQ+.

Updated Language	Outdated Language	Why It Matters
Pronouns, correct pronouns, or proper pronouns, name, correct name	Preferred pronouns, preferred name	A person's name and pronouns are their name and pronouns, not simply a preference. Using someone's correct name and pronouns is a simple way to show respect. If you are unsure of someone's pronouns, use gender neutral pronouns such as they, them, theirs until they confirm what their pronouns are. Practicing this with all people regardless of their gender expression will help you avoid making assumptions about someone's identity.
Using transgender exclusively as an adjective	Using transgender as a verb (transgendered, transgenering) or noun (a transgender)	The term transgender is an adjective and should be used as transgender person, transgender pride flag, transgender community, etc.
A person identifies as transgender. You can also say they identify as a man, a woman, or nonbinary.	A person used to be man or woman, a person was born a boy or girl.	Never say someone "used to be" another gender or was "born" another gender. Someone's gender identity is valid from the moment they disclose it to you, regardless of whether you previously knew them by a different name or pronouns.
Some tribal communities may use the term Two-Spirit.	Tribal communities use the term Two-Spirit.	Most indigenous communities had or have their own dialects with unique words to describe all of their recognized sexual orientations and gender identities. Some native languages were exterminated through colonization and "two-spirit" became a new word that some communities adopted to describe people who fall out of the expected gender and sexuality norms. It is not accepted by all indigenous communities.
Another gender, another sex	Opposite sex, opposite gender	The word "opposite" implies there are only two genders or two sexes and does not acknowledge the existence of nonbinary or intersex individuals.

Updated Language	Outdated Language	Why It Matters
Rejecting or affirming behaviors	Rejecting or affirming families	The outdated language stigmatizes families by characterizing them as wholly accepting or wholly rejecting, when in fact, many families move across a spectrum of showing accepting and rejecting behaviors. Additionally, families may be struggling to learn what is supportive to their LGBTQ+ child. Family support is incredibly beneficial to LGBTQ+ young people, so language should focus on changing the behaviors, not the family. Also note that speaking about family in the LGBTQ+ community might also include “chosen family,” which is a term used to describe family that may not be biologically or legally tied to the person, but plays an important family role in their lives.
Transgender	Transsexual	An older term; still used by some people who have changed or seek to change their bodies through medical interventions. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and use the word transgender or trans. It is always best practice to ask how someone identifies and to use the term they request.
Gender affirming surgery	Sex change, sex reassignment surgery, gender reassignment surgery	Here, the word “sex” is a stand-in for the word “gender,” but gender doesn’t change when someone undergoes an operation. Because they already identify as said gender, these surgeries instead affirm their gender.
They/Them/Theirs	Gendered language in written materials (e.g., policies & brochures) which have references to “he or she,” “she/he,” or “(s)he”	Using “he or she” or another variation implies these are the only two pronouns people use and does not acknowledge the existence of people who use any other pronouns. It is appropriate to instead use singular “they.” For example, instead of saying “the client is best suited to tell you about his or her needs,” just write “the client is best suited to tell you about their needs.”

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