

Words matter.

Learning how to talk about suicide in a hopeful, respectful way has the power to save lives.

01 / Language Guidelines

The topic of suicide should be approached with care and compassion. Whether we are engaging in a dialogue, talking to someone with lived experience or writing about the issue in a professional setting, being mindful of our language is not just about being politically correct. It's about saving lives.

As our knowledge and understanding of suicide evolves, the way we talk about it must evolve as well. To help you be more conscious of your own language decisions, this guide will show you how to avoid reinforcing the stigma that prevents people from seeking help when they need it most.

While there are specific terms and phrases to avoid when speaking about suicide and mental illness, the general rules below can help you choose your words more carefully.

Avoid:

- Anything that reinforces stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination against people with mental illness and suicidal ideation
- Anything that implies mental illness makes people more creative, fragile or violent
- Anything that refers to or defines people by their diagnosis

Choosing our words carefully is about more than avoiding stigmatizing terms. The language we use can also have a positive effect, which makes choosing the right words just as important as avoiding the wrong ones.

- Be direct. We know that talking to someone about suicide won't cause or increase suicidal thoughts, or cause the person to act on them. It can help them feel less isolated and scared.
- Be hopeful. People can and do get better.
- Encourage people to seek help.

02 / Language Guidelines

| INSTEAD OF THIS... | ...SAY THIS | WHY |
|--|---|---|
| commit/committed suicide | died by suicide / death by suicide / lost their life to suicide | “commit” implies suicide is a sin or crime, reinforcing the stigma that it’s a selfish act and personal choice using neutral phrasing like “died by suicide” helps strip away the shame/blame element |
| successful/unsuccessful suicide completed/failed suicide | died by suicide / survived a suicide attempt / lived through a suicide attempt fatal suicidal behaviour / non-fatal suicidal behaviour fatal suicide attempt / non-fatal suicide attempt | the notion of a “successful” suicide is inappropriate because it frames a very tragic outcome as an achievement or something positive to be matter-of-fact, a suicide attempt is either fatal or not |
| epidemic, skyrocketing | rising, increasing | words like “epidemic” can spark panic, making suicide seem inevitable or more common than it actually is by using purely quantitative, less emotionally charged terms like “rising”, we can avoid instilling a sense of doom or hopelessness |
| <Name> is suicidal | <Name> is facing suicide / is thinking of suicide / has suffered through suicidal thoughts / has experienced suicidal thoughts | we don’t want to define someone by their experience with suicide; they are more than their suicidal thoughts |
| He’s suicidal They’re a schizophrenic She’s bipolar The mentally ill <Substance> addicts | he is facing suicide / thinking of suicide / experiencing suicidal thoughts they have schizophrenia / are living with schizophrenia people with mental illness people addicted to <substance>, people with addiction | putting the condition before the person reduces someone’s identity to their diagnosis— people aren’t their illness; they <i>have</i> an illness people-first language shows respect for the individual, reinforcing the fact that their condition does not define them |

These recommendations have been informed by the Canadian Psychiatric Association’s *Media Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide*.

Together, we can change the way the world perceives and treats people facing suicide.

The unfortunate reality is that many stigmatizing phrases and ways of talking about suicide have been ingrained into our vocabulary. Even the most dedicated supporters of the mental health movement may find themselves slipping up from time to time, and that’s okay. This does not make you a bad person—it makes you human.

If you catch yourself using problematic language about suicide or mental illness, correct yourself out loud. By letting those around you know why your words were harmful, you can turn the conversation into a positive learning experience for everyone involved. If we all put in this effort, we will see a fundamental shift in the way society addresses these issues.

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