

How to Reduce Stigma Through Safe Language

To increase our understanding of behavioral health, we need to become more comfortable talking about mental health and substance use in our daily lives. A shared understanding of how to talk about mental health contribute to a psychologically safe team environment and is central to having productive discussions that don't reinforce unfair or damaging stereotypes.

What is stigma? Stigma is a deeply held negative view or the disapproval of an individual or group of people based on certain characteristics.

People who belong to certain groups are stigmatized more than others. For example, in the United States, one of the most stigmatized groups are those who are diagnosed with a mental health condition. Stigma thrives on misinformation and falsehoods, often creating a perpetual cycle that prevents the breakthrough of accurate information. Speaking openly and knowledgably about mental health and substance use is one of the best ways to overcome these challenges.

What is stigmatizing language? Words and phrases that talk about behavioral health in a disparaging or mocking manner are not only hurtful, but they support and often strengthen negative stereotypes. Therefore it's vital that we talk about mental health in a respectful manner that decreases any negative connotation. People might make statements, such as the below, without realizing the ways in which it reinforces negative stereotypes. Here are examples of how we can talk more respectfully:

STIGMATIZING

She's crazy to be with him.
What's wrong with her.

He's so moody all the time.

My daughter is acting psycho again today.

NON-STIGMATIZING

I don't understand why she's is still in that relationship. It must be hard for her to leave.

I think he's having a hard time today.

My daughter is struggling today. I'm trying to figure out how to support her.