



## Directing Change Lesson Plan: Mental Health

### Lesson #1- Language and the Words We Use

**Objective:** Students will discuss the power of language and the words we use when talking about mental health and mental illness.

**Time:** 45-60 minutes

**Materials:** Access to computer and large screen/projector to project PowerPoint presentation  
Access to internet to access educational films

### **Additional Resources:**

- Contact your local NAMI chapter about an Ending the Silence Presentation:  
<http://namica.org/programs/education/ending-the-silence/>
- Directing Change films:
  - “Language is Powerful”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHjcRmBfVC8&feature=youtu.be>
  - “Hurdles”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Be-4qOqJRu4>

---

### **ENGAGE**

- 1) Ask students: Can you think of some words that may be hurtful to someone experiencing a mental illness but are used in everyday language?

Notes to teacher: Discussion points about language:

- The word “crazy”- how could that word make someone feel? Think about it in terms of mental illness. Seems harmless, but is it?
  - The word “committed”- the first thing that comes to mind is often negative: Crime, committed a sin.
  - What are positive things that come to mind with the word “committed”? - committed relationship, committed to my art, committed to my soccer team- but first thing that comes to mind is negative connotations.
  - When we talk about suicide, we don’t want to say “he/she committed suicide”, we would say “he/she died by suicide”.
- 2) Watch these Directing Change films. Are there any other examples of incorrect terminology that you can find substitutes for?

- “Language is Powerful”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHjcRmBfVC8&feature=youtu.be>
- “Hurdles”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Be-4qOqJRu4>

(3) Watch this Directing Change film. Can you give any examples of correct people first language? Why do you think not using people (or person) first language might be discriminatory?

- “The Beauty of Mental Health”: <https://vimeo.com/394006785>

## TALKING POINTS

- 1) **Person first language** respectfully puts the person before the illness and reinforces the idea that those who experience mental health challenges are not defined by their condition. Using person-first language helps steer clear of stigmatizing language that may lead to discriminatory ideals.

Person first language respectfully puts the person before the illness and reinforces the idea that those who experience mental health challenges are not defined by their condition. Using person-first language helps steer clear of stigmatizing language that may lead to discriminatory ideals.

Use	Do NOT use:
<i>I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.</i>	<i>I am bipolar.</i>
<i>She is experiencing a mental health challenge.</i>	<i>She is mentally ill.</i>
<i>People living with mental health challenges...</i>	<i>The mentally ill.</i>
<i>He has Schizophrenia.</i>	<i>He is Schizophrenic.</i>
<i>She experiences symptoms of Depression.</i>	<i>She suffers from depression.</i>

- 2) Avoid using derogatory terms like “crazy” and “psycho” and other negative labels. These words can be stigmatizing and can reinforce stereotypes and labels that could keep people from seeking help. Here are some examples of labels to avoid:

Mentally ill	Cuckoo
Emotionally disturbed	Maniac



Insane	Lunatic
Crazy	Looney
Odd	Wacko
Abnormal	

- 3) The language we use when we talk about actions related to suicide is also important. The more clear and respectful we can be when speaking about actions related to suicide, the more we will be able to remove misconceptions that prevent people from getting support.

<b>Use</b>	<b>Do NOT Use</b>
<p><i>“died by suicide”</i> or <i>“took their own life”</i></p>	<p><i>“committed suicide”</i>  <i>Note: Use of the word commit can imply crime/sin</i></p>
<p><i>“attempted suicide”</i></p>	<p><i>“successful/completed” or “unsuccessful”</i>  <i>Note: There is no success, or lack of success, when dealing with suicide</i></p>

## REFLECT

Ask students to observe language you use in everyday life that could be helpful. What about language that is not helpful? - how can they rephrase or choose different words? Challenge students to be mindful of how they use language for the rest of the day and consciously make an effort to replace those words.

### Assignment Ideas:

- Write a short story about how language can be used in a positive way.
- Find 2 articles that give examples of language related to mental health being used correctly and incorrectly. Pick an article and imagine you are someone reading it from the perspective of someone with a mental illness. Point out language that was respectful and accurate, as well as language that was incorrect and hurtful and why.