



5 Key Guidelines for Talking About Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

1. Lead with empathy.

Educate yourself, examine your identity, and practice empathy for the people whom you are speaking to or about.

2. Respect personal choice.

Defer to language that the person you are addressing, or speaking with, prefers.

3. Use person-first language.

Acknowledge someone as a person before describing their personal attributes or health conditions.

4. Focus on empowerment over shame.

Avoid terms that elicit negativity, judgement and blame. Use technical language with a specific, clear meaning.

5. Apply a trauma-sensitive lens.

Be sensitive to the, potentially, traumatic experiences of the person you are talking about.

Specific Language Substitutions

Refrain From	Say This When Necessary
That's crazy, psycho, insane, nuts	That's wild, bizarre, odd, eccentric, bananas
It drives me crazy	It annoys me
I'm so OCD*/I'm OCD* about that	I am meticulous/I'm particular about that
Patient, client, case	An individual needing mental health or SUD services
They are manic	They have a lot of energy right now
They are paranoid/delusional	They are experiencing a lot of fear [offer specific context for the situation, such as: They are worried their neighbors want to hurt them]
They are a paranoid schizophrenic She's anorexic He's depressed She's bipolar	They have paranoid schizophrenia She is experiencing anorexia nervosa He is experiencing major depression She has bipolar disorder
He's mentally retarded	He has an intellectual or developmental disability
They are emotionally disturbed	They are experiencing a serious emotional condition
He is a special education student	He is a student receiving special education services
Addict/Junkie/Drug use/Substance abuser	Person experiencing a substance use disorder
Former/Reformed addict	Person in recovery/Person who previously used drugs
Addicted baby	Baby born to a mother who used drugs while pregnant/Baby with signs of withdrawal from a prenatal drug exposure/Newborn exposed to substances
They are mentally ill	They are living with mental illness/They are experiencing a mental health condition
Super utilizers, High-needs adults	Individuals with complex support and service needs
Committed/Successful suicide Unsuccessful suicide	Died by/Lost to/Completed suicide Attempted suicide
Suffering from mental illness	Living/Experiencing/Thriving with a mental health condition
Those who...	People/Individuals who...

* OCD: Obsessive-compulsive disorder