

Stigmatizing Language with Unintended Meanings: “Persons with Mental Illness” or “Mentally Ill Persons”?

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Language is a method of communication that transmits intended and unintended meanings. Unintended stigmatizing meanings, which are probably more insidious and dangerous (than language that clearly communicates intended meanings) can perpetuate socially constructed power dynamics and become so “commonplace” that they are invisible. Persons must be aware of these unintended stigmatizing meanings. This is especially important in language about marginalized persons such as persons with mental illness.

There are numerous examples of ways that we use language, most of the time unintentionally, which further stigmatizes and marginalizes persons with mental illness. For example, in the previous sentence I used the phrase “persons with mental illness”—meaning a person with one or more mental illnesses. This could be said another way and would convey a very different meaning. “Mentally ill person,” read concretely, places the mental illness before the person, which gives primacy of the illness (“mental illness”) over the human being (“person”). The illness is only one aspect of the whole human being and in language should not be placed before the human being. Other examples of placing mental illness before the human being is when persons refer to “persons with bipolar disorder” as “bipolars” or when they refer to “individuals with schizophrenia” as “schizophrenics.” “Persons with bipolar disorder” and “individuals with schizophrenia” are persons first and should therefore not be referred to as their diagnoses first. Another example of ways that we communicate a narrow and perhaps unintended meaning is the phrase “behavioral health” that at least in the United States has been used to describe mental health and mental health treatment. This phrase places primacy of “behaviors” over thoughts, feelings, experiences, or expressions of mental illness and mental health.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) organization understands the importance of language. NAMI knows that language shapes understandings, which can then shape society’s treatment of persons with mental illness that subsequently impacts public policy. NAMI refers to mental illnesses as “brain disorders.” This terminology is thought to decrease the stigmatization and marginalization of mental illnesses by describing mental illnesses in physiological (brain structure and function) or biological terms that represent “real” medical problems.

Stigmatizing language with unintended meanings can perpetuate power and control and further marginalize persons with mental illness. Language is important. If you do not intend to stigmatize and marginalize, please be thoughtful and purposeful. It may greatly impact persons with mental illness.