

Culturally Sensitive Responses to Challenge Stigmatizing Language

General Tips:

1. Avoid value judgments (i.e. “that’s a terrible thing to say”; “you don’t know what you are talking about”)
2. The response depends on the relationship and level of trust you’ve built with a person.
3. The goal is to start a meaningful dialogue and conversation. We don’t want to be thought of as “language police”.
4. Use creative language.
5. Use humor.
6. Share recovery stories to counter myths.
7. Assume positive intent.
8. Tone makes a difference. Approach with compassion and curiosity.
9. Ask for what you need.

Teach and Learn:

1. Re-frame what is said; offer language options. “I’m learning that people usually prefer person-first language, such as ‘a person living with bipolar disorder’.”
2. Gently suggest person-first language. “I dealt with challenges from anorexia, I’m not ‘an anorexic’. I don’t like to define myself by my past with an eating disorder.”
3. Normalize it. Say, “Everyone has a certain level of dysfunction.”
4. Ask others to help hold you accountable for your own language use to model openness to growth. “You’ve told me it bothers you when people say _____. If I slip up, will you hold me accountable? I want to respect your wishes.”
5. Be curious. “What about your experience makes you say that?” or, “Can you help me understand what you mean by that?” Or genuinely inquire about a person’s familiarity with mental health issues. “How much do you know about mental health?”
6. Talk about your own feelings and perspective in response to the comment. “I’m feeling uncomfortable as a result of you saying _____.” Or start with, “Well, in my experience...”
7. Name it, claim it, tame it. For example, someone says, “Crazy people should be locked up and not left to wander the streets.” Response: “You may not know this, but you’re talking about me. I have schizophrenia.”
8. Deflect their words. For example, if someone calls you crazy, say, “I’m good with that.”
9. When someone makes a stigmatizing generalization like: “Borderlines sure are crazy”, respond with compassion to elicit empathy, for example. “I wonder how traumatic her background was” or “I wonder what it’s like to face that challenge.”
10. Let people know how their words and actions make you feel. For example, “That felt a little harsh.” Then ask for what you need. “Can I ask you to be a little more sensitive?”
11. Share your preference for using or not using labels. “You know, I don’t like to use labels to talk about my experience with mental health challenges.”