



Say This, Not That

Some terms, phrases, and themes backfire with members of the public. Here's what to say instead.

Many arguments that advocates use don't advance thinking about preventing and treating mental health disorders. Advocates can make different—and more productive—choices about what to say, and what to leave unsaid. Try these terms, phrases, and themes in your communications materials.

Terms and Phrases

Used to this?
"Screenings"

Try this instead!
"Having a conversation"

Here's why it works:

Audiences outside the health and human services sectors think screenings are invasive and assume that providers use them to catch and punish people. Conversations, on the other hand, are innocuous. They take place in any setting with different types of people and providers.

Used to this?
"Mentally ill adults"

Try this instead!
"Adults with mental health disorders" or "Adults experiencing mental health problems"

Here's why it works:

Label the condition, not the person. Framing mental health challenges as problematic conditions invites conversations about treatment and solutions. At the same time, it shuts down the public's tendency to blame individuals for mental health disorders.

Themes

Used to this?

“Prevention is the best approach”

Try this instead!

“Protective factors such as...” or
“Prevention programs
like ____ and ____”

Here’s why it works:

The public isn’t clear about what prevention looks like, or how it works. Dropping the word “prevention” into a communication isn’t particularly helpful, but offering examples can be.

Used to this?

Certain groups have higher rates
of mental illness than others

Try this instead!

Mental health supports are more
readily available in some places
than in others

Here’s why it works:

Communicating about disparities can easily slide into unproductive comparisons between groups. Explaining the cause of disparities as unreliable and uneven access to care frames different outcomes as a solvable, systemic problem.

Used to this?

“The detrimental effects of poor
mental health include...”

Try this instead!

“Mental health is closely linked to
other social issues, like...”

Here’s why it works:

The reframed phrase highlights key connections across social issues without pegging mental illness as a root cause of other social problems. Even better, offer examples to explain how these issues intersect with each other.

Used to this?

“Breaking the intergenerational cycle of mental illness”

Try this instead!

“2Gen approaches to building wellbeing and wellness” or “Building wellbeing at multiple stages”

Here’s why it works:

To avoid determinism (the belief that mental health disorders are preordained), emphasize that society can take action to prevent and treat mental health disorders and that change is possible.

Used to this?

“Mental illness in parents poses a threat to children and family stability”

Try this instead!

“Support for parents with mental illness benefits children, families, and communities”

Here’s why it works:

Avoid crisis language and promote thinking about solutions to build the public’s sense of efficacy (the belief that individuals have the power to make meaningful, lasting change in society).