



People First Language

Last month I was at a meeting which had the purpose of identifying ways that people with experience of mental illness, can receive better treatment and information from our health system.

Remember that term—people with experience of mental illness.

As the discussion continued, one of us noticed how often the term “consumer” was used to describe people with experience of mental illness, and pointed out that there were better ways to identify ourselves.

I was not the only one who used the word “consumer” in this way; it is my hope that I am not the only person who attended that meeting who has the intention of breaking the habit of describing people—real, living, breathing people like myself—with such a label.

There was no malicious intent in me doing so—I am, after all, what I would have described as a “mental health consumer” myself. The fact remains that some of us were still using a label to describe the people our group had been set up to help.

The way I’ve come to see it is this: people have a great many

different facets to their lives, and their experience with the mental health system is just one small part of this. Certainly it does not do people justice to classify them based on it.

What we should endeavour to use when speaking about people and their experience of mental illness is “people first language.” It can be dehumanizing to group people together with terms such as “the mentally ill,” or by the name of their condition e.g. “schizophrenics.”

Regardless of our differences, nothing can change the fact that we are people first, and deserving of the same dignity as anyone else. We should never lose sight of this fact, and make it our aim to convey this message through the words we choose to describe ourselves and others.

It can be discouraging to watch the news sometimes and see the way in which we are often portrayed by the media, and be reminded that the habit of labeling is still alive and well. It’s an example of just how far we have to go as a society.

A big part of the problem seems to be that mental illness is still something of a taboo subject; it can happen to anyone at any

time in their lives, but it’s something that we are still reluctant to acknowledge.

The attached stigma is often worse than the condition itself. Society at large seems to see boundaries between those who have and haven’t experienced mental illness where none exist; having such a condition is not a predictor of what one can achieve in life, or one’s status or worth.

Words are powerful things; they have the power to alter the way we see ourselves and the world around us. By choosing our words carefully, whether talking about ourselves or those around us, we have a chance of making a difference.

Getting into the habit of speaking about people with experience of mental illness using “people first language” is not only beneficial to others—it may also improve how you think about yourself.

Like Rachel Hunter famously said, “it won’t happen overnight, but it will happen.” If things are going to improve, it will happen one person at a time. Why not start with the person in the mirror?

Tony Spencer

“In this new century, mentally ill people will have the science, the organized voting strength, and the means to leave our ghettos of isolation behind us.
We will finally join with the mainstream community, where we’ll be able to live as independent individuals and not as a group of people who are known and feared by the names of our illnesses.”
Ken Steele



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