



Words Matter: USING PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE WHEN REFERRING TO INDIVIDUALS WITH MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS AND CONDITIONS

It is important to recognize that all people are individuals with individual abilities, interests, and needs. Some individuals have mental health conditions and the emphasis on “people-first language” is a more accurate way of speaking about them – ordinary individuals seeking to live ordinary lives as moms, dads, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, and teachers. About 54 million Americans (one out of every five individuals), whose contributions enrich our communities, have a mental health condition like depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and dementia, and others.

iSOSY promotes physical and mental wellness for all. We demonstrate that commitment by encouraging people-first language. Placing the person first and the disability second helps eliminate stereotypes that can form. People-first language emphasizes the individuality, equality, dignity, and hope of people with disabilities. Rather than defining people primarily by their disability, people-first language conveys respect by emphasizing the fact that individuals with a disability are, first and foremost, just people.

EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

Say:	Instead of:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He/She has bipolar illness (or a diagnosis of...). • He/She has schizophrenia (or a diagnosis of...). • He/She has an alcohol/substance use disorder. • He/She has a mental illness. • Persons/people/individuals (plural) with mental illnesses (plural). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He/She is bipolar. • He/She is schizophrenic. • He/She is an alcoholic/addict/junkie. • He/She is mentally ill. • The mentally ill or people with mental illness (singular).

GENERAL RULES BY WHICH TO SPEAK, WRITE, RESPECT, AND EMPOWER

<p>Having vs. Being</p>	<p>To have an illness, or to have the diagnosis of an illness, is notably different than to be the illness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When I have bipolar illness, I recognize that aspect of myself, much as I recognize that I have brown eyes.</i> • <i>When I am bipolar, I take on the identity of being bipolar. It becomes me, and I become it.</i> <p>When we talk about individuals as separate from their health conditions, we recognize the person first, and we acknowledge the person’s power to overcome that condition and live a full life separate from it. This empowers people to believe, “I may have it, but it doesn’t have me!”</p>
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