

Talking About Mental Health in the Military: A Guide for Leaders



As military leaders, it's important to consider your language when talking about mental health, especially since mental health stigma remains a significant concern. Language is powerful, and the words you use to communicate can — even unintentionally — reinforce the stigma sometimes associated with mental health conditions and concerns. Mental health stigma can be defined as negative attitudes or beliefs toward people with mental health disorders, and can lead to discrimination, lack of understanding, and may serve as a barrier to seeking care and treatment. One way to challenge stigma associated with mental health is by choosing words that do not label, mischaracterize, or judge service members with mental health disorders, substance use disorders or related concerns. Choosing your words carefully can have a big impact — it has the ability to change misperceptions and can even pave the way for service members in your unit to get the treatment they need.

This tool offers some general guidelines for talking about military mental health concerns within your unit and with other leaders.

| Avoid ... | Instead, Consider Saying ... |
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| <p style="text-align: center;">Words That Suggest Pity or Distress</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ Do you know your treatment options as a victim of PTSD? ✘ You shouldn't suffer this anxiety alone. Talking with someone is always an option. <p><i>Why avoid this? Talking about a mental health disorder as an affliction can contribute to stigma. It also makes an assumption about a service member's inner experience of their condition or symptoms.</i></p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Objective Descriptions</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Do you know your treatment options as someone who has a PTSD diagnosis? ✓ You shouldn't experience this anxiety alone. Talking with someone is always an option. <p><i>Why this instead? Keeping language objective and precise avoids judgement or assumptions about how someone's diagnosis affects them.</i></p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Mental Health Disorder Labeling</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ I think he is depressed. ✘ He is mentally disabled due to combat injuries. <p><i>Why avoid this? This kind of wording applies a label to the service member, as though the condition is a defining trait or characteristic.</i></p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Clinical Language About Mental Health Disorders</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I think he is showing signs of depression. ✓ He has cognitive difficulties due to combat injuries. <p><i>Why this instead? Using clinical terminology avoids labeling and suggests that the service member can be evaluated and treated.</i></p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Substance Use Disorder Labeling</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✘ My friend is an addict and I want to help. ✘ Most alcoholics are going to need long-term support or professional help. <p><i>Why avoid this? This kind of wording applies a label to the service member, and treats the condition as if it is a defining trait or characteristic. It also implies that the condition is a form of misconduct.</i></p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Objective Language About Substance Use Disorders</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ My friend has a substance use disorder and I want to help. ✓ Most people with alcohol use disorder are going to need long-term support or professional help. <p><i>Why this instead? Using clinical descriptions clarifies that someone with substance use disorder can be evaluated and treated. This language also emphasizes that the condition is a medical disorder, not one of choice.</i></p> |

| Uncharitable Language About Substance Use | Objective, Diagnostic Language |
|--|---|
| <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Drug abuse will impact readiness. ✗ If relapse occurs, know that you are not a treatment failure. <p><i>Why avoid this? These terms reinforce the stereotypes that people with substance use disorder are willfully engaging in substance misuse, which can contribute to negative judgements about their inability to improve or complete treatment.</i></p> | <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Substance misuse will impact readiness. ✓ If relapse occurs, know that you are still capable of recovery. <p><i>Why this instead? These alternatives reflect the current terms used by health care professionals and avoid applying a negative label to the service member.</i></p> |
| Language That Implies Instability or Criminal Behavior | Matter-of-Fact Statements |
| <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ He's thinking about committing suicide. ✗ People with suicidal ideations are dangerous. <p><i>Why avoid this? This kind of language reinforces the stereotype that people with mental health disorders are volatile and to be feared, which can contribute to stigma.</i></p> | <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ He's thinking about ending his life. ✓ People with suicidal ideations can pose a threat to themselves or others. <p><i>Why this instead? This wording captures the safety concerns related to some mental health conditions or symptoms without labeling the individual as violent or dangerous. Remember to only describe someone as potentially threatening when it's appropriate.</i></p> |
| Outdated Terminology | Current Terminology |
| <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ She went to a mental institution to get specialized care. ✗ Remember that seeking care for your mental disease is a sign of strength. <p><i>Why avoid this? These terms don't align with the language currently used by mental health professionals, and can be considered offensive.</i></p> | <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ She went to an inpatient treatment facility to get specialized care. ✓ Remember that seeking care for your mental health disorder is a sign of strength. <p><i>Why this instead? These alternatives reflect the current terminology used by mental health professionals.</i></p> |

Bonus Tip: Avoid talking about mental health or mental health disorders in unrelated situations.

When describing someone or talking about a person's attributes, avoid using mental health-related terms to describe their traits. For example, saying things like **"She's super OCD about that kind of stuff,"** or **"He's insane for thinking like that"** can trivialize mental health disorders and devalue them as concerns. Instead, speak objectively about others and **remove mental health from the conversation entirely.**