

Offensive Language About Mental Illness

Most of us have heard statements like the following: “The weather is so bipolar!”; “I’m so OCD”; “I’m depressed about my favorite TV character.” Phrases like this are spoken and written so often that many people do not think about them. They imply that bipolar disorder only refers to changeable moods, that obsessive-compulsive disorder is nothing more than a need for cleanliness, and that depression is the same as temporary sadness. These phrases are not accurate representations of the actual medical conditions.

Explanation

These phrases refer to diagnosable mental illnesses. Frequently, different diagnoses are used as adjectives to describe quirky personality traits, changeable moods, and even non-human objects and events. People often use such phrases in both speech and writing without intending to cause harm. Even when texting, one might casually say “she was crazy!” without thinking about the insulting implications of this remark.

These casual statements are problematic: they perpetuate misconceptions about mental illness. Studies have found that many young people do not “know enough to allow them to correctly identify mental illness in themselves or in their peers” (Rose et al., 2007). It is important to dispel myths and stigmas about mental illness, as well as demonstrate how to respectfully talk about said conditions. Otherwise, we trivialize the experiences of people with these illnesses and make it more difficult for people to identify when they need mental health counseling.

Additional Examples of Hurtful Phrases

My teacher is psycho.
She moved schizophrenically through the park.
He seems so anorexic.
She acts very PTSD.

Solution

These phrases are hurtful because they misrepresent the illnesses that they refer to, and they imply that people who experience psychosis, schizophrenia, anorexia, or PTSD are somehow in the wrong. Furthermore, these sentences all use mental illness to insult individuals, so the connotations are always negative (further attaching the negative stigma to mental illness in general). Using this type of language has a wide impact: it makes readers believe that having a mental illness is akin to having a negative personality trait. Research has suggested that “[y]oung people who believe that mental illnesses are the responsibility of the person affected are more

likely to react to people who are mentally ill with anger, pitilessness or avoidance” (Rose et al., 2007). The language that we use makes a significant difference. We can avoid spreading these misconceptions if we do the following: 1) think more carefully and consider our words before writing and/or speaking them, and 2) avoid relying on mental illness terminology when we write and speak.

Alternative Adjectives

The English language is full of adjectives. Instead of using the names of different mental illnesses, you can search for other words and phrases that fit your meaning. This way, you do not misrepresent an illness. Some examples are included in the table below.

Offensive Phrase	New Adjective	New Adjective	New Adjective
Psycho	Unreasonable	Emotional	Illogical
Schizophrenic	Haphazard	Random	Aimless
Anorexic	Thin	Slender	Skinny
PTSD	Distressed	Tense	Nervous

Activity: Recognizing and Correcting Offensive Language

Point out the offensive word/phrase in each of the following sentences. Then try to rewrite the sentences using different phrasing. The answer key will provide examples of potential rewrites, though there are many different words you could use.

1. She is so bipolar about making decisions.
2. That one movie made everyone depressed.
3. He is really OCD about his clothes.
4. Listening to *Les Misérables* made me suicidal.
5. She is unpleasantly borderline.
6. The man in the movie acted psychotic.
7. The internet keeps having panic attacks about celebrities.

Answer Key

1. Bipolar. Rewrite: “She has trouble making decisions.”
2. Depressed. Rewrite: “That one movie made everyone sad.”
3. OCD. Rewrite: “He’s particular about his clothes.”
4. Suicidal. Rewrite: “Listening to *Les Misérables* made me emotional.”
5. Borderline. Rewrite: “She’s an unpleasant person.”

6. Psychotic. Rewrite: “The man in the movie acted erratic.”
7. Panic Attack. Rewrite: “The internet keeps exploding over celebrities.”

References

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