

Tamara Nolan, Communications Manager, St Patrick's Mental Health Services

We'd like to thank you for having us here today, and we very much welcome the opportunity for discussion and reflection on language in the context of mental health matters and in relation to your work in this area. St. Patrick's Mental Health Services is Ireland's largest independent not-for-profit mental healthcare provider comprising inpatient and day patient services in Dublin for adolescents and adults, and outpatient clinics located around the country. Mental health advocacy and a human rights-based approach to healthcare are core parts of our organisational ethos. St. Patrick's Mental Health Services is committed to the promotion of mental health, and the protection of the rights and integrity of those experiencing mental health difficulties. A key strand of our advocacy work is to reduce stigma associated with mental health difficulties or needs. Sadly, our annual online attitudes survey, carried out with 500 participants, again demonstrated that in 2017 stigma remains a consistent presence in Ireland as regards mental health needs and or difficulties. Stigma has been identified as a barrier to accessing timely help and support for those experiencing mental health difficulties.

Language can be a powerful enabler of stigma or discrimination when used in a disparaging or derogatory way, but it can also be a powerful enabler of positive change in attitudes where respect, dignity and inclusiveness are central to the choice of words used. For example, a 2016 study in the Journal of Counseling and Development demonstrated the positive effect of the use of person-first language on shaping attitudes in relation to mental health issues – specifically in this case contrasting the use of the terms 'people with mental illness' versus 'the mentally ill'. In addition to the person-first principle, organisations including advocacy and disability rights groups, professional associations, and mental health charities have highlighted other ways in which language should be thoughtfully considered when mental health issues are discussed in public fora. For example, alternatives are now commonly used in place of value-laden words – 'dying by suicide' rather

than 'committing', 'abstinent' in place of the term 'clean' in relation to addiction, and 'experiencing' rather than 'suffering from' mental health difficulties.

St. Patrick's Mental Health Services recognises that mental health and wellbeing, as with physical health, exists on a continuum where varying levels of needs and difficulties may arise for any of us over the course of our lives. St. Patrick's Mental Health Services maintains a recovery ethos for all its services and programmes, and the importance of using recovery-focussed language should be recognised also, in particular for people experiencing mental health difficulties or needs that are ongoing in nature – for example, someone may be 'living' or 'living well' with bipolar affective disorder.

With regards to diagnostic language and psychiatric terms, it's important to recognise that some people dislike the notion of 'labels' and may feel certain psychiatric language does not describe or relate to their mental health experiences. However, it is our experience that many people we work with find receiving a diagnosis helpful in order to understand what's been happening for them, help others understand particular difficulties they've been experiencing, and to access the most effective care and treatment. Again the person-first principle is pertinent here where diagnoses are being referenced – for example:

- Someone experiencing depression
- A person who has a diagnosis of schizophrenia
- People experiencing mental health difficulties

Of note also - the American Psychiatric Association have compiled guidelines for the media in using psychiatric language responsibly, and highlight as an example the need to acknowledge a person's experiences and or feelings rather than speak in terms of reductive 'symptoms' only.

**Louise O' Leary, Senior Occupational Therapist/ Chair of Advocacy
Committee, St Patrick's Mental Health Services**

A further important consideration where information related to mental health is shared in the public domain concerns health literacy. Health literacy refers to our ability to understand health information we may receive verbally or in writing, our ability to navigate health care systems and environments, and our ability to make informed choices about our health. Health literacy is relevant to both people with and without general literacy and or numeracy difficulties. St. Patrick's Mental Health Services recognises that accessible information and environments are crucial to the provision of the highest quality of mental health care, and as such are collaborating at present with the National Adult Literacy Agency to improve our health literacy standards across the service for both service users and staff. Within the field of mental health, health literacy remains an emerging concept. However, there is increasing awareness of the importance of providing accessible information to the general public as exemplified by the publication of the first user-friendly edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistics Manual- 5 in 2015. Accessible information about mental health and wellbeing and how to access relevant services is especially pertinent given the higher rates of mental health difficulties among disadvantaged and disenfranchised people within Irish society.

Principles advocated by the National Adult Literacy Agency to support literacy-friendly practices and improve health literacy amongst the public include:

- Using clear understandable terms and limiting medical jargon
- Explaining any necessary medical or potentially unfamiliar terms used
- Using 'Plain English' principles – that is using language that is easily understood the first time it is read or heard
- Avoiding acronyms or abbreviations

- Starting with the most important piece of information and trying to limit the amount of information given at a time
- For written information, there are several recommendations to be aware of including the use of sans-serif fonts, adequate spacing and easy to read font sizing

Further information on these guidelines are available on the NALA website, for any of you who may be unfamiliar with these ideas.

A final point to note relates to how people accessing supports and services for mental health needs may wish to be identified within that context. The terms 'service user', 'consumer', 'client', or 'patient' are commonly used and individuals may express preferences for any of these terms. St. Patrick's Mental Health Services uses the term 'service user', where it may be appropriate, in line with the language used by the Mental Health Commission. More generally however, in keeping with the afore-mentioned person-first principle, 'people who use mental health services' may be preferable.

St. Patrick's Mental Health Services recognises mental health as a fundamental and dynamic feature of being human, that is not unique to any one 'group' within society, and within which difficulties and needs can arise for any of us over the course of life. There is no definitive 'right' way to speak about mental health as ultimately, any of us experiencing mental health difficulties will decide for ourselves the language we may feel best fits with our experiences and or values. What must be upheld and reflected, however, in any discussions about mental health, and especially those held within a public forum, is the right to integrity, dignity, respect, equality and protection from discrimination for all residents of the State.

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