



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

RESOURCE

Say it Better: Changing the Conversation About Mental Health – Classroom Activity

Purpose of this Activity

Students often hear or use mental health-related language in casual ways that can unintentionally reinforce stigma. This activity gives students an opportunity to reflect on the words they hear, understand why certain language can be harmful, and practice using more supportive, respectful alternatives.

How to Use this Activity

Designed for 5th-12th grade, this activity is designed to fit within a single class period and requires no advance preparation.

- To enhance the experience, you can print or share optional materials ahead of time, such as reflection or journaling sheets and student “badges.”
- Students can work in small groups or with partners, followed by a full class debrief.
- Throughout the activity, encourage a tone of curiosity rather than judgment.

**For younger students, consider adapting by simplifying language, using visuals or focusing on feelings and kindness. For example, younger students might role-play kind vs. hurtful words or draw what supportive language “looks like.”*

“Say it Better” Student Worksheet

A reflection and activity sheet to help you think about language and mental health.

- [“Say it Better” Student Worksheet \(Fillable\)](#)
- [“Say it Better” Student Worksheet \(Printable\)](#)
- [“Say it Better” Badge \(Optional\)](#)

Step 1: Recognize Language (Think-Pair-Share)

Ask students to reflect on this question and then pair up or discuss in small groups.

“What are some things you’ve heard people say about mental health that might be harmful or misleading? This could be at school, on social media, or in everyday conversations.”

Facilitator Guidance

- **Create a safe space:** As students discuss, circulate around the room to check in with groups or partners. Remind students that this is a judgment-free zone and that the goal is to explore and learn, not to shame or call out individuals.
- **Encourage deeper thinking:** Ask follow-up questions, like *“Why do you think that phrase might be harmful?”* or *“How might someone feel if they heard that said about them?”*
- **Clarify misunderstandings:** If students seem unsure, gently offer examples or reframe the question to help them connect. For example: *“Think about a time someone made a joke or comment about mental health that didn’t sit right with you. Maybe they said something like ‘She’s so bipolar today’ or ‘I’m totally OCD about my notes.’ What do you think people mean when they say those things? What might be harmful about that?”*
- **Validate contributions:** Acknowledge that these conversations can be challenging and commend student for engaging thoughtfully.

Step 2: Language Check-In (Whole or Small Groups)

As a whole class, or in small groups, review this table below.

The table includes common phrases related to mental health, why they may be harmful or stigmatizing, and more supportive and accurate alternatives.

Facilitator Guidance

- **Guide with curiosity:** You don’t need to be an expert. Focus on helping students reflect on why certain language might be harmful and how alternatives could feel more respectful. It’s okay to say, *“Let’s think through that together.”*
- **Encourage honest conversation, even if students push back:** If students say things like, *“It’s just a joke,”* invite them to consider how someone with lived experience might feel hearing that. Stay curious, not corrective.
- **Normalize growth and reflection:** If a student recognizes something they’ve said before, thank them for being open. Let the class know we’ve all used language without realizing its impact, and learning from it is the point.

Common Phrases or Language	Why It's Harmful or Stigmatizing	A More Supportive Alternative
"I'm so OCD about my desk."	Minimizes OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), which is a serious mental health condition.	"I really like to keep things organized."
"She's being bipolar!"	Misuses a clinical diagnosis as an insult or casual description.	"She seems to be having a tough day emotionally."
"He's totally psycho."	Dehumanizes and reinforces fear around mental illness.	"He seems really upset or overwhelmed."

Step 3: Practice Reframing

Have each student independently select a phrase they've heard or used before.

Then, guide them through reframing the phrase to use more supportive, accurate language.

Directions:

1. Choose one phrase you've heard or used before related to mental health.
2. Think about why this phrase might be harmful or misleading.
3. Write down a more respectful, supportive alternative.

Facilitator Guidance

- **Give space and time to reflect:** Allow quiet time for students to think through their chosen phrase(s) and possible alternatives.
- **Offer support if needed:** Walk around and check in with students who may need help framing their thoughts or understanding why a phrase might be harmful.
- **Normalize the process of change:** Reassure students that learning to reframe language takes practice and encourage them to keep an open mind as they grow.

Step 4: Reflect and Share

Use the following prompts to guide a whole group conversation or individual journaling.

Why do you think people use those kinds of phrases?

How can changing our words help others feel more supported?

What could our class or school do to change the conversation around mental health?

Facilitator Guidance

- **Encourage open discussion:** Allow students to share their thoughts openly. If students are hesitant, you can start by sharing your own thoughts or asking an easy question, like *“What’s one thing you learned today?”*
- **Normalize reflection:** Remind students that reflecting on how we speak is a process and that it’s okay if their thoughts evolve over time.
- **Focus on action:** When discussing changes that could happen in the class or school, encourage practical, realistic ideas that could create a more supportive environment for mental health conversations. Consider discussing the next steps for putting these changes into action!

Optional Extension

Invite students to create posters, social media graphics, or school announcements to spread awareness and encourage more thoughtful language around mental health.

Students can also personalize the “Say it Better” badge included in the student worksheet, that reads “My words matter. I choose to say it better.” They can decorate it with colors, symbols, or words that are meaningful to them. The badge serves as a personal reminder to use supportive, stigma-free language.



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