



## Shifting the Conversation: Reflection Tool for Educators on Mental Health Language

### Why Language Matters

The words you use in your classroom, building, and community shape the way students and others understand and talk about mental health. Even casual comments can reinforce stigma. The good news: you have the power to shift that culture!

This reflection tool is your starting point. To begin, understanding the distinction between mental health and mental illness can set the foundation for more thoughtful language (Kittleson, 2019).

Mental Health	Mental Illness
Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community (WHO, 2022).	Mental illness refers to diagnosable conditions that affect thoughts, emotions, or behaviors, often causing distress or impairment (Mayo Clinic, 2023).
Everyone has mental health, and it fluctuates over time, influenced by both positive and negative life experiences.	Not everyone has a mental illness, but it can affect anyone, regardless of age or background.
Mental health can be supported through self-care practices, healthy relationships, and the use of coping strategies.	Mental illnesses may require professional treatment such as therapy, medication, or support systems.

### Step 1: Recognize and Reflect

This section invites you to reflect honestly on what you've heard, and maybe even said, about mental health. Language is learned, and it's easy to fall into patterns without realizing their impact (Weist et al., 2019). You're not alone in this work, and you're not being judged. Noticing is the first step to changing!

Use the Language Check-in chart below to guide your thinking and let yourself be curious about what you discover. Reflecting on your language helps you create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone.

Common Phrases or Language	Why It's Harmful or Stigmatizing	A More Supportive Alternative
"That's psycho!"	Labels and mocks mental illness.	"They seem overwhelmed right now."
"She's so OCD."	Minimizes a serious mental health condition.	"She is very organized!"
"He's only doing that for attention."	Dismisses real distress.	"He might be struggling, and he does not know how to ask for help."
"He's bipolar."	Defines a person by their mental health condition.	"He's a person living with bipolar disorder."  (Person-first language)

## Reflection Questions

What phrases have you heard in your school building that might reinforce stigma?

Which ones do you catch yourself using? Where did you learn them?

What feelings come up when you hear students or colleagues use stigmatizing language?

## Step 2: Respond and Reframe

You're more likely to speak up if you've already thought through how you want to respond. This section gives you a few ways to prepare to interrupt stigmatizing language, gently and clearly. These aren't scripts to memorize, but rather tools to help you find your own voice.

Practice them and try them out! Adjust them so they feel right for you.

### Suggestions:

- *Can I share another way to say that?*

- *I know we don't mean harm, but let's think about how that might land.*
- *I'm trying to be more aware of how I talk about mental health. Maybe we could reframe that?*

**Practice:**

Think of a time you heard someone say something stigmatizing about mental health. What was said? How could you respond in the moment next time?

**Step 3: Commit to the Shift**

This section is your space to decide how you want to grow. Small changes in your language and presence can ripple into a more compassionate school culture.

Use this space to help you commit to your next steps, no guilt, just growth. Be honest, specific, and proud of the shift you're choosing to make.

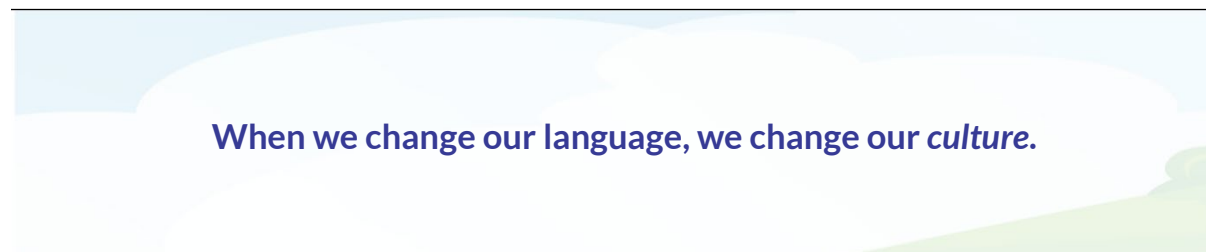
**I will work to reduce stigma by:**

- Listening to how I talk about mental health.
- Interrupting harmful language when I hear it.
- Using language that affirms, supports, and connects.

**One phrase I'll stop using is:**

**One way I'll model supportive language this week is:**

**One colleague or student I can partner with on this:**



## References

Kittleson, M. J. 2019. "Mental Health v. Mental Illness: A Health Education Perspective." *American Journal of Health Education*, 50(4), 210–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2019.1616011>.

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