

Language Matters:
rethinking our words about the
experience called mental illness

Donna Hardaker
dhardaker@mhac.org

Language Matters:

how the mental health sector talks about
the experience called mental illness
and the people who have it

Language Matters:

how the mental health sector talks about
the experience called “mental illness”
and the people who “have” it





“Power is the ability to define someone else’s reality and to have that person respond to your definition as if it were their own.”

--Dr. Wade Nobles

“...No one can dictate who you are to other people.”

--Prince

“What we say informs what we think.”

--DH

As human beings, what we say and how we think informs our behavior, our decisions.

As leaders, what we say and how we think informs system design, public perception.

As leaders, our unconscious bias limits potential for system transformation.

As leaders, we can recognize that we have bias, and constantly seek to uncover our own unconscious bias.

Unconscious bias in the mental health sector

- medical labels, symptom-based
- clinical ownership of the words used
- philosophy of parts
- normal is good
- fix it culture
- privilege

Privilege and tokenism



Exploring lenses

- social justice
- anti-oppression, power balancing
- dominant culture
- micro-aggressions

Micro-aggressions

- denigrating messages towards a certain group, inherent in words and actions, usually below level of awareness
- well-intentioned, mean no offense, unaware that may be causing harm

Multiple contexts

- general public
- the workplace
- treatment systems

Micro context – individual words, phrases

Macro context – philosophies, mindsets



What happens when we do not constantly wonder about language and messaging?

We end up with words and messages that perpetuate dominant culture thinking.

Dominant culture thinking will not contribute to system transformation.

“Many have described mental health stigma as much more life-limiting and disabling than the illness itself.”

“Many employees choose to go untreated rather than being labelled as unreliable, unproductive and lazy.”

“Depressed people commonly have a negative view of themselves, the world and the future.”

“[when a person has a diagnosis of depression] ...the person usually looks sad and depressed...”

“Severe schizophrenia is the most disabling of conditions.”

“Disability gets in the way of a productive life.”

“What do you think stigma feels like to those that are living with mental health problems?”

“Over 43 million adults suffer with a mental illness every year.”

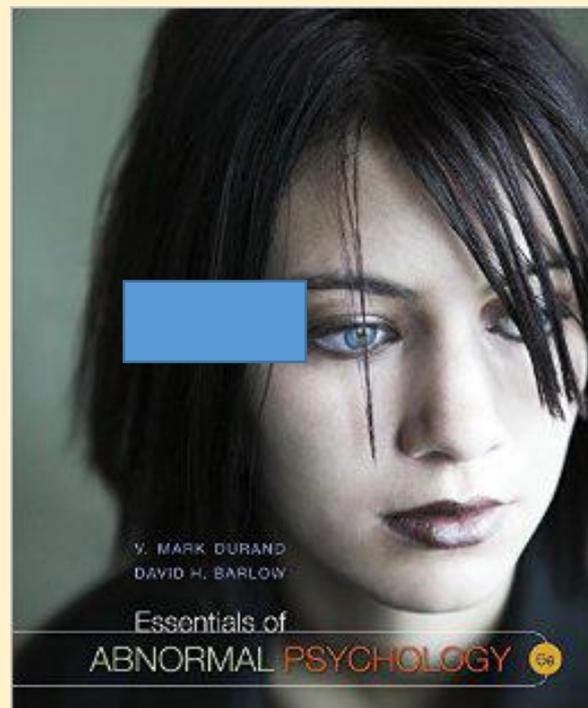
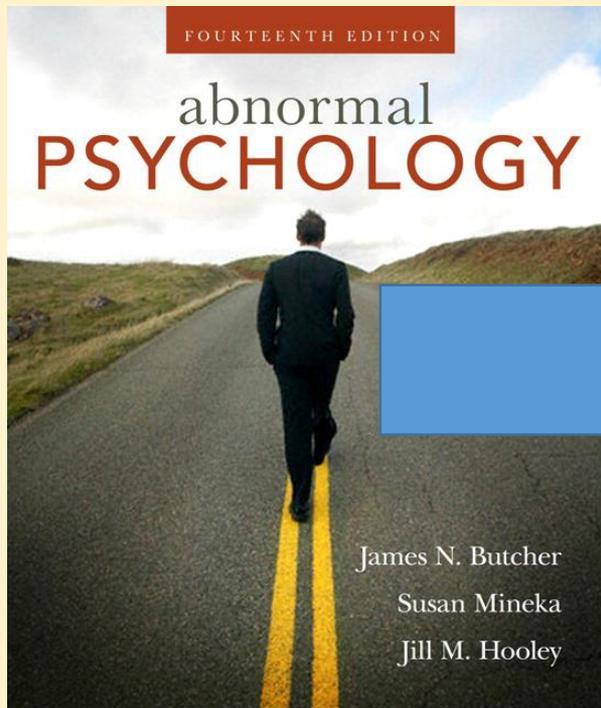
“1 in 5 Canadians are suffering from mental illness right now.”

“Are you strong enough to keep your temper?”
(a learning section heading)

“The behaviors of employees with undiagnosed or untreated mental health problems such as anxiety and depression can and do result in significant financial losses for a company.”

Who is sitting in undergrad psych learning that they are “abnormal”?

What is the impact?



What are we saying with these word choices?

- Abnormal Psychology
- mental illness
- she is depressed
- disability
- stigma of mental illness
- mental health stigma
- mental health consumer
- commit suicide
- a completed suicide
- suffering from a mental illness
- denies having a mental illness
- disclosed having a mental illness
- he struggles with depression
- she recovered from anxiety

Let's hear your ideas

Donna Hardaker

Director, Wellness Works

Mental Health America of California

dhardaker@mhac.org