NORMALIZE

TOOLBOX TALK:

How to Talk About Mental Health and Suicide

STANDUP

Talking about mental health and suicide can feel awkward and uncomfortable. The stigma that surrounds these topics can make us embarrassed to bring them up and sometimes what happens is we use inappropriate phrases and language to address them. The problem with this is that it increases the stigma around mental health and suicide and can make it harder for someone in need of help to ask for it.

We have the power to eliminate the stigma and make these conversations easier by adopting proper language and increasing our mental health literacy. Don't feel bad if you don't know how to properly talk about these things – most people do! But you can make the choice to change your language so that you can help others.

If we think about mental illness like any other physical illness it helps to reframe our thinking and language. We don't say somebody "is cancer" so we shouldn't say that about mental illness either. Swap out "is" for "is experiencing anxiety" or "has depression". When we say they "are depressed" it labels the whole person as the disorder and it becomes their identity – as opposed to addressing it as a health issue.

Similarly, our language around suicide can be changed to help not only those at risk, but those who may have attempted or lost someone have more dignity as well. "Committed suicide" is the common phrase we hear but "commit" implies a crime or a sin. Suicide is a death caused by the disease of mental illness, addiction, or despair. Saying "died by suicide" is a much more respectful term to use.

The most important thing is to think about what you are saying and whether it will make you seem approachable for someone who is experiencing mental illness or suicidal thoughts to talk to. Avoid using words like crazy, psycho, schizo or wacko as descriptions for anyone – even if they aren't experiencing mental illness, using those words increases the negative stigma around mental health and makes it harder for those in need to speak up.

CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY ALLIANCE FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

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