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When Words Become Weapons

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In recent years, mental health terminology has crept slowly into use in media and into widespread everyday usage. Let's take a moment to talk about how we should and should not talk about mental health, and how misusing mental health terminology causes hurt and harm.

Despite the efforts of many mental health advocates, to this day, there remains a tremendous stigma around mental illness. Though we pay lip service when it comes to the need for society to understand, have compassion for and support those who suffer from mental illness, there is a rise in the use of mental health terminology to call out, wound, and shame others.

It is not uncommon for a politician to accuse a political opponent of being mentally ill or challenged, and such remarks spread far and wide in the 24-hour news cycle, where the intentions and fall-out of such remarks are rarely questioned, or users called out for uttering such disparaging accusations. Imagine, for an instant, the outcry that would emerge if a political opponent dared to mock individual suffering from heart disease, cancer, or a physical disability. Of course, such behavior would not be tolerated. But when it comes to mental health, weaponization of diagnoses is ignored — or worse — seen as a clever and humorous put-down. Further, these weaponized terms are increasingly showing up in movies, television, social media, and online dating sites.

Hurt and harm

There exists a long list of mental health conditions and disorders, including PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Schizophrenia, Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders, Gender or Body Dysphoria, Conduct Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Autism

Spectrum Disorder, and many more. The DSM-IV, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders includes close to 300 disorders.

Each disorder describes a cluster of symptoms, names, and terms. These terms are intended for use among mental health professionals, to communicate symptoms in the course of treatment. A number of these terms have entered into general discourse, including narcissist, narcissistic, psycho and psychotic, OCD, ADD, and ADHD. And much of their usage comes with the intent to hurt and harm.

No matter what

No matter what we are talking about, words matter. When a politician or political pundit accuses someone of being mentally ill or deficient, these words matter, on many levels. They matter to the person who is more often than not baselessly and incorrectly being identified as mentally ill. They matter to anyone who is struggling with a mental illness and is afraid to seek help for fear of being judged. They matter to the individual who is in treatment for mental health issues. They matter to the people who love and support someone struggling with their mental health. And in the larger picture, they matter to every one of us, since most people, in the course of their lifetime will either experience or be close to someone struggling with their mental health.

Weaponizing mental health labels and diagnoses

Every mental health term describes a diagnosis. Diagnoses are arrived at by qualified mental health professionals after rigorous testing protocols, including psychological evaluations, psychometric testing and physical examination. Any 'naming' criteria that fall short of this is nothing more than name-calling, or the weaponization of terminology.

For example, while the term narcissist may be useful in a discussion among clinicians, it is virtually impossible to imagine anyone calling someone a narcissist in everyday conversation as anything short less than unkind, to put it mildly! If someone labels a friend, acquaintance, or colleague a narcissist to call out self-absorbed behavior or thoughtlessness treatment, they are misusing — and essentially weaponizing — a blanket clinical term that describes serious personality disorder. The term, in such casual usage, is intended to expose, shame, and injure the person who is being labeled.

Words matter

Calling someone a narcissist may seem a harsh or extreme example, but hundreds of YouTube influencers are currently amassing thousands of followers around their amateur vlogs that call out people and behaviors they identify as narcissistic. Many other mental health terms are equally routinely misused and abused. It is not unusual for someone to call a detail-oriented colleague or friend who hates to be late for an appointment or is meticulous in their habits 'OCD.' Equally common is labeling someone who is at times forgetful, distracted, or inattentive as ADHD. We label people whose unpredictable thoughts, actions or choices seem to us to come out of nowhere *schizo*, or people who we judge as quick to anger *crazy*, *nuts*, *insane*, *bipolar*, or *psycho*.

A more compassionate approach

The next time we are tempted to judge and belittle someone — in our thoughts or our words — with a mental health term, we need to remind ourselves that we can and should do better. Remember, for example, that a psychological disorder refers to a deviant, distressful and dysfunctional pattern of thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that interferes

with an individual's ability to function in a healthy way. If you or someone you loved were struggling with their mental health, imagine the senseless hurt and harm the weaponization of that term might cause. Consider the effect on anyone within earshot of hearing weaponized mental health terms might be negatively impacted, and how it might diminish their self-esteem, and discourage them from seeking help.

When we find ourselves struggling with the way we are being treated by someone, rather than lash out with wounding mental health labels, we can, when possible, raise our concerns in conversation with the person with whom we are struggling, or limit our exposure to someone who does not respect our contributions or boundaries. When we see someone who is struggling or in need of help, we can behave more compassionately, rather than demean and diminish them. And when we hear others misuse and abuse mental health terms, we can begin to contextualize these remarks as the wounding words that they truly are.

Watching our words

The more mental health terms proliferate our everyday vocabulary, the more we need to choose our words wisely. When it comes to using mental health terminology in day-to-day life:

- **Consider** your intentions and the feelings of those around you before labeling someone with a mental health term
- **Reflect** on your own choices and actions when you feel someone has harmed or misused you or taken you for granted. Consider resolving inter-personal issues in a more respectful manner, or establishing healthier boundaries around your time and resources
- **Challenge** others on their casual use of disparaging mental health labels
- **Raise** your awareness around mental health issues and challenges. The more you know, the less likely you will be to harm another person through your misuse of mental health terminologies
- **Leave** the labels to the professionals. Mental health terms describe a cluster of symptoms and are intended for use among professional clinicians in treating patients



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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker, columnist and advocate in the field of mental health and wellness. Her new book, A Deeper Wellness, is now available for purchase at <https://www.book.adeeperwellness.com>, and her in-depth online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, offers powerful mental health guidance, life skills, knowledge and healing, anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/> <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>

