

## 6 Tips for Writing about Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted much of the population’s mental health. As a result, mental health has become a regular topic in homes and organizations. The question is: how do we talk about mental health in a positive, engaging way?

Following these six tips helps communication professionals set the tone and encourage both grassroots and leader dialogue around tough topics, like mental health.

### 1. AVOID WORDS THAT CREATE A NEGATIVE IMPRESSION

For decades, people living with mental health conditions have faced stigma and felt shame. When writing about mental health for internal or external audiences, consider the following word choices to avoid perpetuating the stigma and shame. (See table below.)

### 2. AUTHENTIC STORIES RESONATE

One in four people around the world will experience mental health conditions in their lifetime (World Health Organization). Right now, you have people in your organization who have navigated through life with mental health conditions long before the pandemic started. If you know who they are and they are willing to share, their stories can help others.

Instead of...	Use...
...portraying people as victims of mental health conditions (e.g. suffers from, afflicted with)	→ ...Jane has depression; John lives with anxiety.
...defining someone by their condition (e.g. saying someone is depressed, is anxious).	→ ...the pandemic has impacted everyone’s mental health; Sam is experiencing mental health impacts.
...using the terms mental health issue or mentally ill.	→ ... Mark had been a few days late with several deliverables and his leader, Jill, knew that was unusual. Mark typically delivers ahead of schedule....
...defining behaviour or thought patterns as normal or abnormal. (There is no definitive definition of ‘normal’.)	

### 3. WRITE FROM A PLACE OF EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

Empathy is the ability to step into someone else's shoes and see the world from their vantage point. With this human touch, we can consider how each person reacts to stress in different ways. And you can provide support and validate others' experiences, even when you don't agree or understand.

Metaphors and examples are great ways to create understanding that evokes empathy and compassion. For example, to describe the effect of antidepressants: "Have you ever been to a concert and saw people wearing ear protection because the music was too loud to enjoy? When it works well, that's the experience with anti-depressants. It reduces the intensity of the negative emotions you feel so you can enjoy everyday experiences."

### 4. IT'S OKAY TO USE HUMOUR (IF UNSURE, ASK)

Humour can be used while still displaying respect about the impacts to mental health. It can also release tension and create room for empathy with those less comfortable with the topic. If you're unsure whether a humorous touch is appropriate or not, have someone living with a mental health condition review the content.

An example is a woman living with depression describing the things that make her feel better on tough days: "Soft, fuzzy things. I have a soft fuzzy blanket on every couch and it's calming to be cozy under the blanket while I pet my soft fuzzy dog. And yes, I have more than one fuzzy onesie (best for winter)."

Questions or other suggestions for creating content about mental health? Email [Shelly Nowroski](mailto:Shelly.Nowroski).

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### 5. WRITE IN ACTIVE VOICE

The active voice is direct, often in the first person, implies ownership and is essential to empathy and compassion.

**Active:** "Mary found she was feeling anxious about returning to the workplace so she set-up a meeting with her leader to discuss her concerns."

**Passive:** "A meeting with her leader was set-up to discuss concerns about Mary's return to the workplace."

### 6. WRITE WITH PLAIN LANGUAGE

Plain language can be used with any topic, not just mental health. The intent is to reduce the risk of confusing or losing the reader. Studies have shown that people at all education levels find writing is easiest to understand and remember when it is written at junior high levels (grades 6 to 8).

Key tips for writing in plain language:

- Use everyday words and language rather than unnecessary technical terms or jargon.
- Use short sentences (one idea per sentence) and short paragraphs (good use of white space).
- Avoid unnecessary words: instead of 'in the event of', use 'if'. Or instead of 'at the present time', use 'now' or 'currently'.