Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. It is a medical problem, just like heart disease or diabetes. Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these). Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities - and they are often accompanied by substance use. It’s critical that we talk about these challenges and that we do so in the right way.

We have all heard derogatory terms used to describe someone who has a mental illness. Here are a few to jog your memory: Cuckoo; Mad as a hatter; Screwy – imagine mocking someone with an illness such as cancer or heart disease? The terms we use to describe mental illness matter.

Certain language exaggerates mental illness and reinforces prejudice. Always use person-first language. Avoid words that suggest a lack of quality of life for people with substance use concerns. Terms like addict reduce a person’s identity, deny dignity/humanity and imply powerlessness or the inability to recover.

The importance of using person-first language when talking about mental illness and substance use cannot be overstated. This is true for members of the media, support and treatment professionals, family members, friends and the community at large. Person-first language separates the individual from the symptoms they experience - maintaining their identity as people with strengths who have the power to recover. Here are a few examples.

Person-first phrases
- A person living with a mental health condition
- A person with substance use challenges
- My son diagnosed with bipolar disorder
- My daughter with schizophrenia
- The individual I’m treating for depression
- My father who is experiencing substance use with alcohol

Phrases that hinder recovery
- The mentally ill; psycho. crazy, lunatic.
- Addict; meth head, tweaker, burnout, druggie, junkie
- My son is bipolar
- My schizo daughter
- The depressed individual
- My alcoholic father

The Family Peer workforce should be thought of as professional and a respected career choice as much as clinicians, care managers, etc.

There are specific differences between adult peers and family peers. They have different lived and systems navigation experience.

Think before you act. Think twice before you speak. Your words matter.