

## Person First Language Matters

Words have power. They have the power to teach, the power to wound, the power to shape the way people think, feel, and act toward others. When a stigmatized group such as those living with mental illnesses is struggling for increased understanding and acceptance, attention to the language used in talking and writing about them/us is particularly important.

**"People first" language is simply using words that refer to the person first, rather than the person's condition. Avoid terms such as "the mentally ill". Instead say: "people with mental illness" or "a man or woman who has a mental illness".**

People living with mental illness, like all people look to those they respect for compassion and understanding. We must help stamp out the use of demeaning terms such as "crazy", "lunatic", "mental", "nut", or "psycho." We must also discourage the use of the words "victim", "afflicted with", and "suffers from". These are terms that evoke pity, and other negative images and feelings.

**"People First" language helps us remember that people are unique individuals and that their abilities or disabilities are only part of who they are.**

In a nationwide survey, the most common message mental health consumers wanted to give to others was a request to be thought of as more than just their disease; "A person is composed of so many more pieces than mental illness," said a typical survey participant. "I am more than a diagnosis. I am a whole person and I deserve to be treated as a whole person." Our use of people first language is one way we can show we agree.

Adapted from the June 1998 article in *The Bell*, newsletter of the National Mental Health Association, the *Episcopal Mental Illness Network*, and *The Media Project*, University of Kansas.