



Recovery Oriented Language Guide Quick Reference

Words are important. The language we use and the stories we tell can influence personal outcomes.

Don't

Do



DON'T say “they are mentally ill”



DO say “person living with a mental health condition”



DON'T define the person by their struggle, distress or diagnosis



DO say “a person who has been diagnosed with symptoms of...”



DON'T use negative or judgemental language, make assumptions based on external appearances or use terms like ‘suffers from’ or ‘is a victim of’



DO use language that conveys hope and optimism, or that supports and promotes recovery



DON'T assume the person wants to be called a particular term (e.g. ‘consumer’ or ‘client’)



DO ask how the person would like to be addressed



DON'T jump in and speak for someone



DO allow people the time to find the words that express what they need to say



DON'T argue with a person's perception of events, minimise a person's experience or harp on failures of the past



DO ask people if they feel ready to make their own decisions or would like to be supported, and in what way



DON'T argue that information was already provided or known



DO ask whether the person has been given the opportunity to ask questions, and check that they have the information they need



DON'T use the concept of goals unless it feels appropriate.



DO ask “what do you think might be steps forward” and talk about aspirations, dreams and hopes



DON'T use specialist or medical language unless you accompany it with plain English explanations



DO clarify that people have understood the information they have been given



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Worn out words

✘ Sam is... schizophrenic... borderline...
anorexic...

✘ Sam has challenging or complex
behaviours

✘ Sam is dangerous, abusive, angry

✘ Sam is paranoid

✘ Sam has a chronic mental illness

✘ Sam will never recover - they
reject help

✘ Sam has challenging behaviour

✘ Sam rejects help and advice

✘ Sam can't decide what's best

✘ Sam is uncooperative

Words of hope, acceptance and respect

✔ Sam is a person with lived experience
of...

✔ Sam is trying hard to self-advocate
and get their needs met

✔ Sam tends to... describe the action...
when upset

✔ Sam is experiencing fear and
confusion

✔ Sam has been working towards their
recovery for a long time

✔ So far, Sam has not accessed support
they feel is helpful

✔ It is sometimes challenging for me to
work with Sam

✔ Sam is someone used to being
independent who is finding it difficult
to accept support

✔ Sam may need some support to help
make decisions

✔ We need to ask Sam what we can do
to support them best.

For more ideas and tips, explore our full version of the Recovery
Oriented Language Guide at mhcc.org.au/our-work/resources