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The Most Powerful Tool in Preventing Suicide? Our Words.

Over the last few months, our community has been hit hard by several attempted and completed suicides. In the wake of these tragedies, we can often feel helpless and scared. But there's so much we can do every day to stop these kinds of deaths. In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month, it's time to have an important talk about the most powerful tool we possess to prevent suicide: our words.

Why? Because our words directly affect the creation and perpetuation of mental health stigma (a word that basically means stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination). Think about it this way: Would you ever tell a loved one with cancer to "snap out of it?" What about your coworker with asthma; would you tell them they just need to focus more on the positives in life? Would you ever suggest that a person with diabetes "get over it"?

It sounds silly, right? But that's often what people with mental illness hear when they share their diagnoses with others – even though depression, anxiety, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder are just as legitimate health concerns as cancer, asthma or diabetes. When folks with mental illness are met with this kind of skepticism or judgement, they are more likely to struggle silently and avoid seeking help so they won't be labeled as "crazy." Sadly, this can have a deadly affect, as untreated mental illness can sometimes lead to death by suicide.

Luckily, there are a few easy things you can do to use your words for good and fight mental health stigma. To commemorate Mental Health Awareness Month, practice making these small changes in your everyday life and help create a culture where no one is ashamed to talk about mental illness:

1. **When someone tells you they have a mental illness, don't try to convince them otherwise.** This may sound like a no-brainer, but people with mental health diagnoses often hear things like "but doesn't everyone have a bit of OCD in them?" or "my sister's boyfriend's aunt's ex-husband had depression but then he got better so you'll probably be fine." The best thing to do when a person shares their diagnosis with you? Thank them for sharing. Tell them you care about them and are here to help. React the same way you would if a friend shared they were diagnosed with high blood pressure.
2. **Make sure you're using the right language to talk about suicide.** Most commonly in our society, we hear or use the phrase "committed suicide" when talking about someone who took their own life. This is actually a very stigmatizing statement, as it implies that the person who died did something wrong. It perpetuates the stigma that keeps others from coming forward when they're having suicidal thoughts. Remember: People commit crimes, they don't commit suicide. The correct language to use is "died by suicide." For example: "It's so tragic, did you hear that celebrity died by suicide yesterday?"
3. **Watch your adjectives.** It's also common to hear people say things like "the weather is so bipolar today!" or "wow, that thunderstorm was crazy!" It's never a good idea to use a mental health diagnosis as an adjective for something else. It keeps alive that stigma that people with mental illness are bad or unsafe – neither of which is true just because of their diagnosis. I used

to say “crazy” all the time, until I learned how it feeds into our culture of stigma. Now, I say “the weather is so unpredictable this week!” or “wow, that thunderstorm was wild!” It’s a small change, but it can go a long way in fighting stigma.

4. **Use person-first language.** Person-first language (aka “a person with anorexia” instead of “anorexic”) is critically important because it conveys that the person has a problem that can be addressed. The latter implies that the person is the problem. Apply this rule for all disorders – a person with schizophrenia vs. a schizophrenic; a person with substance use disorder vs. a drug user; and a person with bulimia vs. a bulimic.
5. **Set the record straight.** When you hear someone saying “committed suicide” or “the weather is so bipolar,” gently correct them and explain the importance of correct language when it comes to mental health. Each time we do so, we’re making it safer for those struggling to get help. And that’s important, because mental illness is highly treatable; in fact, Relate’s statistics show that 80 percent of clients stabilize or improve their mental health as a result of therapy. So there’s no reason for people to struggle alone. You play a big part in making sure others know that, too.