

Labels and Language Activity

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Some people choose to use and own various identity labels; others do not
 - What are the pros and cons of using labels?
 - What are some reasons why people may choose not to use labels?
 - What are situations where it may be beneficial to use labels?
 - Should I Avoid Using Labels for Others?
- There is no right or wrong choice. It is up to each person to decide for themselves.

Some people choose to identify as “a person with mental illness” or not, and some choose to use specific labels to talk about their mental health challenges, whereas others do not want to use labels to talk about their experiences. It is up to each person to decide for themselves; our power increases when we approach situations with the ability to choose how to frame our experiences.

Pros and Cons of using labels

There are pros and cons to using labels. The same person may choose to use a label in one situation, while in other situations they will not use labels. In worksheet 1, we will explore some of the pros of using labels, then in Worksheet 2, we will explore some of the cons. Note that most pros have a naturally corresponding con. The choice to use labels is often dependent upon context. Take a few minutes to consider some of the pros below. Put checks next to the reasons that especially stand out for you. Are there others? Add them in the blank lines in the worksheet.

Worksheet 1

Pros of Using Labels to Describe Experiences with Mental Health

<p>1. Legitimizes the Experience to Self and Others</p> <p>Self-understanding, relief. “I finally understand why I’ve been dealing with this.”</p> <p>Labels and diagnoses can reduce shame and blame. They can help other people see that you are not just being difficult, lazy, choosing to be depressed, etc., but that it is a legitimate condition that you can manage with support and treatment.</p> <p>A label provides a concise way to describe the complexities of the particular mental health challenge you face.</p>	
<p>2. Access to treatment and recovery</p> <p>A label or diagnosis is the beginning of recovery for many people.</p> <p>Having a diagnosis means you are more likely to have access to treatment, and that it will be covered by insurance.</p> <p>Having a diagnosis can help you access certain types of treatment that have worked well for others with that diagnosis.</p> <p>Our culture often avoids making change, or addressing need of treatment until something is defined as an illness.</p> <p>You are able to ask for reasonable accommodations at work and school.</p>	
<p>3. Support</p> <p>You can find peers and get support from those with similar experiences as you.</p> <p>Focus to plan recovery. Better understanding of trends of self.</p>	
<p>4.</p>	
<p>5.</p>	
<p>6.</p>	
<p>7.</p>	

Worksheet 2

Many of the pros of using labels have naturally corresponding cons. Worksheet 2 lists some of them. Put checks next to the reasons that especially stand out for you. Are there others? Add them in the blank lines in the worksheet.

Cons of Using Labels to Describe Experiences with Mental Health

<p>1. Limiting</p> <p>Limits my self-perception; puts a complex experience into a box.</p> <p>Reinforces rigidity in: care, family’s perception, and view of self. Limits sense of potential. Having the label can create a sense of permanency, and the idea that you can’t move beyond it.</p> <p>Drives you in the direction of fixed solutions and one-size fits all approaches.</p>	
<p>2. Focus on Negative aspects</p> <p>Can increase impact of co-occurring stigma. Additional labels that are seen as negative may have impact our view of self, and others’ view of us.</p> <p>Labels can be disempowering.</p> <p>The positive aspects of your experience are lost.</p>	
<p>3. Everything is seen through the lens of the illness.</p> <p>Typical human experiences and emotions are blamed on the illness.</p> <p>Physical health concerns are not taken as seriously.</p> <p>The individual with the diagnosis is not seen as capable.</p>	
<p>4.</p>	
<p>5.</p>	
<p>6.</p>	
<p>7.</p>	

Should I Avoid Using Labels for Others?

The best label for someone is the name they choose. Begin any conversation by asking what name they prefer you to use and then use it. Listen to how the person refers to themselves as the conversation progresses. Even if someone talks about themselves using a label, they may not want you to speak to or about them using the label. Always ask before using someone's label to describe them. For example, if someone has talked about their depression to you, you might say, "It sounded to me like you are someone who has experience living with depression, can you help me to think through how I can best offer support to my friend who is expressing that they are depressed?" If you pick up that the person wants to speak up as an advocate to reduce mental health stigma, you might ask, "Since you have mentioned that you want your story to help others, how do you feel about me letting a friend of mine who leads a stigma reduction program in their workplace, know about you?"

When someone shares an aspect of their identity with you, it is important not to assume that they are giving you permission to share that information beyond your direct relationship. It is helpful to check back in with the person each time you encounter a situation where you are wondering if sharing their identity would be helpful. People's minds can change from situation to situation or in different periods of their life. Act with caution and respect for the person's right to make that choice.