It’s easy to label someone else and overlook what’s really inside. When mental illnesses are used as labels—depressed, schizophrenic, manic or hyperactive—these labels hurt. Using negative labels leads to branding and shame—that is called stigma.

Stigma is not just the use of the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a person living with mental illness. Stigma is a barrier and dissuades individuals and their families from getting the help they need due to the fear of discrimination.

Words Can Be Poison
Stigma discourages people from getting help. At any given time, one in four adults and one in five children experiences a mental health problem. Early and appropriate services can be the best way to prevent illness from getting worse. Many people don’t seek such services because they don’t want to be labeled “mentally ill” or “crazy.”

Stigma keeps people from getting good jobs and advancing in the workplace. Some employers are reluctant to hire people who have mental illnesses. Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) such discrimination is illegal. But it still happens!

Stigma leads to fear, mistrust, and violence. Even though the vast majority of people who have mental illnesses are no more violent than anyone else, the average television viewer sees three people with mental illnesses each week—and most of them are portrayed as violent. Such inaccurate portrayals lead to fear of those who have mental illness.

Stigma results in prejudice and discrimination. Many individuals try to prevent people who have mental illness from living in their neighborhood.

Stigma results in inadequate insurance coverage. Many insurance plans do not cover mental health services to the same degree as other illnesses. When mental illnesses are covered, coverage may be limited, inappropriate, or inadequate.
Words Can Heal
Follow these steps to help end the stigma of mental illness:

• Learn more. Below are several local organizations and websites to gain more information.
• Recognize and appreciate the contributions to society made by people who have mental illnesses. They have added to American life—from the arts to the sciences, from medicine to entertainment to professional sports.
• Treat people with the dignity and respect we all deserve. People who have mental illnesses may include your friends, your neighbors and your family.

Do’s and Don’ts

• Do use respectful language such as “person who lives with schizophrenia” or “person diagnosed with bipolar disorder.”
• Do emphasize abilities, not limitations.
• Do tell someone if they express a stigmatizing attitude.
• Don’t portray successful persons with disabilities as super human.
• Don’t use generic labels such as retarded or mentally ill.
• Don’t use terms like crazy, lunatic, manic depressive, slow functioning, or normal.

You can help encourage recognition of mental disorders for what they are: treatable medical conditions.

Adapted from information provided by SAMHSA, www.samhsa.gov

Key Local Mental Health Resources in Pima County, AZ:

• National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI of Southern Arizona), 520-622-5582
• Crisis Response Network, 520-622-6000
• Community Partnership of Southern Arizona—Mental Health First Aid course and behavioral health system information: 520-318-6946 (main line); 866-318-6960 (for TTY Telecommunications Device for the deaf)

More resources available at www.icstucson.org:

• Mental Health Resources for Faith Communities
• Pocket Guide – Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services, Pima Co. 2012
• Resources from the April 27, 2012 Mental Illness Conference in Tucson

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