Communicating Effectively About Mental Health

How to Engage in Meaningful Conversations About Mental Health in Your Communities

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that more than one in five U.S. adults live with a mental health condition. Engaging in clear and meaningful conversations about mental health is the first step in understanding and supporting your community's overall well-being.

Use this resource to help you engage in effective communication about mental health, reduce stigma, and increase the likelihood that community members receive the help they need.

Lead With Partnerships and Community Listening

Mental health is a deeply personal topic that public health communicators should approach with care, cultural awareness, and humility.

In addition to using research and data accessible to you and your organization, lay the groundwork for future mental health communications and guidance through partnerships and community listening.

Partnerships:

Establish partnerships with organizations and leaders who serve your community to help you better understand existing mental health needs and perceptions.

An effective community partner can:

- Strengthen the quality and diversity of the community data you're able to collect.
- Provide guidance and additional channels to reach all target communities.
- Add credibility to your public mental health and well-being messages and goals.
- Expand the depth and reach of your mental health communications and offerings.

Community Listening:

Collect feedback to increase your understanding of your community members' mental health needs and perceptions. Use learnings from ongoing surveys, events, webinars, and other in-person and virtual feedback opportunities to create effective and solutions-focused mental health messaging.

Questions for your Community to Consider:

- What are some of the top stressors in your life currently?
- Do you currently get support for your mental health? If so, what sources of mental health information/support do you rely on?
- Who are the leaders you trust to share reliable mental health information or support?
- How do people in your social circles talk about mental health?

Wondering How to Build Cross-Sector Partnerships that Improve Mental Health?

Learn more in our guide about the best communication practices for developing cross-sector partnerships in your community, informed by Public Health Reaching Across Sectors (PHRASES), a partnership of the de Beaumont Foundation and The Aspen Institute.

Respond With Clarity and Care

Direct, clear language helps ensure information about mental health and pathways to seeking support for mental health conditions are easily understood and positively perceived. Ensure your messaging resonates with your audience by using person-first language and avoiding stigmatizing phrases and assumptions.

What is the Impact of Mental Health Stigma?

Mental health stigma—the negative beliefs and stereotypes people might have toward those who are living with mental health conditions—can discourage people from discussing their experiences and seeking mental health support or treatment.

What is Person-First Language?

Person-first language prioritizes *people* over their conditions or circumstances. The words we use when discussing mental health can shape perceptions of conditions and the people experiencing them.

Use inclusive, person-first language when discussing someone's experience or sharing someone's story on their behalf. For example:

INSTEAD OF…	CONSIDER…
Defining people by their mental health conditions with words like "suffering" or "fighting"	Framing mental health conditions as something people are living with or experiencing. For example, "their neighbor is living with depression."
Only focusing on the negative impacts, statistics, and complications of mental health conditions	Providing broader information about how your community can practice prevention and maintain good mental health
Focusing only on the most common mental health conditions and their symptoms	Offering information and resources that help people assess their unique mental health experiences

Balance Science and Solutions

Include science-based information to illustrate the impacts of poor mental health. It is equally important to explain that mental and behavioral health conditions can be treated, and people can recover when they receive the resources and support they need.

The goal is never to minimize the severity or importance of someone's experience but to highlight the possible solutions and positive outcomes to encourage action.

Example of Communicating the Impact of Loneliness on U.S. Adults

– Imbalanced science-based information: The U.S. Surgeon General declared 'loneliness' an epidemic in 2023. The majority of lonely adults also suffer from depression—a debilitating, lifelong condition.

+ More balanced science-based information: Though 81% of adults who reported loneliness also experience anxiety or depression, many people can manage and recover from these conditions with the right support.

Source: Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

Include Real Stories

Storytelling in public health can educate, unite, and inspire others—particularly individuals who may feel isolated in their experiences. Amplifying and recounting stories of individuals' mental health journeys can also help normalize mental health conversations and inspire others to seek support.

The Power of Storytelling for Mental Health

Health Action Alliance found that storytelling is an effective way to combat stigma, normalize mental health challenges, and empower people to seek support.

Specifically in the workforce, 76% of employees appreciate it when their leaders discuss emotional and mental health. Identifying trusted leaders in your communities to share stories about mental health can have a similar impact.

Offer Actionable Solutions

The most effective public health messaging gives people the information they need to make an informed decision or action to support their health. Maintain a library of vetted mental health resources to help individuals learn more, find support from a mental health professional, or get immediate help.

Self-Help Mental Health Resources

- Support for Mental Health Conditions (National Institute of Mental Health)
- Caring for Your Mind Only Makes You Stronger (Huntsman Mental Health Institute and the Ad Council)
- Mental Health America Online Self-Assessments (Mental Health America)
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (988 Lifeline)
- Disaster Distress Helpline (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Additional Resources for Public Health Communicators

- Mental Health Conversation Guide and Do's and Don'ts (Health Action Alliance)
- Inclusive Language Playbook: Writing About Disability (Communicate Health)
- Protecting the Nation's Mental Health (CDC)
- Communicating Effectively About Mental Health (PHCC)

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS COLLABORATIVE

For additional resources and messaging on other public health topics, visit publichealthcollaborative.org.