Appropriate Language in Discussing Mental Illness
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> "We reaffirm our confidence that God's unqualified love for all persons beckons us to reach out with fully accepting love to all, but particularly to those with disabling inability to relate to themselves or others due to mental illness."
> --1992 Resolution of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church

Language matters. The right kind of language, when discussing mental illness, can help communicate the acceptance and understanding called for by the aboveGeneral Conference resolution. The wrong kind of language, however, can add to the stigma and rejection that persons with mental illness so often encounter.

People First Language

What is the right kind of language to use about mental illness? When speaking or writing about any disability, you need to use what is called "People First Language." This consists of words that refer to the person first, rather than that person's condition. Avoid such terms as "the mentally ill." Instead, say: "People with mental illness," "a man or woman who has a mental illness," "individuals with mental illness," "members of the congregation who have mental illness."

Defining Mental Illness

The term mental illness, refers to a group of brain disorders that cause severe disturbances in thinking, feeling, acting and relating. There are differences in the degree of their severity, and many people prefer to use the terms "prolonged mental illness", "major mental illness" or "serious mental illness" in reference to the more severe disorders. When you are speaking of children, the accepted terminology is "emotional or behavior disorders", rather than "mental illness."

There are many different types of mental illness. The specific categories are listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (revised edition, June 2000) known as DSM-IV-TR. published by the American Psychiatric Association. Key disorders categorized in this manual include Schizophrenia, mood disorders (such as depression and bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders, dementias and personality disorders. These specific terms should not be used globally to describe all mental illness, and they should be used only when you are sure they are correct, both medically and legally.

A Compassionate Community

People with mental illness, like other people of faith, look to the Church for compassion and understanding. The Church community must help stamp out the use of such demeaning terms as "crazy", "lunatic", "nut", or "psycho". It must discourage also the use of the words "victim," "afflicted with", and "suffers from." These are terms that evoke pity, and other negative images, which people with mental illness do not want.

Reaching out "with fully accepting love" involves opening channels of communication with persons with mental illness. Let your words reflect the straightforward and positive view of these individuals that will help open such channels.