

## Writing About Mental Health in the Military



It's important to consider language when writing about mental health in the military. Language is powerful, and the words you use to communicate can — even unintentionally — reinforce the stigma sometimes associated with mental health conditions and concerns. It can even influence behavior. Mental health stigma can be defined as negative attitudes or beliefs toward people with mental health disorders, and can lead to discrimination, lack of understanding, and may serve as a barrier to seeking care and treatment. Mental health stigma remains a significant concern for service members. One way to challenge stigma associated with mental health is by choosing words that do not label, mischaracterize, or judge service members with mental health disorders, substance use disorders, or related concerns. Using language carefully can have a big impact — it has the ability to change misperceptions and can even pave the way for more service members to get the treatment they need.

This tool offers some general guidelines for writing about mental health issues in a military context — whether for articles, blogs, websites, or social media.

Avoid ...	Instead, Consider Writing ...
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Disparaging or Demeaning Language</b></p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ A traumatic brain injury left her <b>mentally deficient and impaired</b>.</li> <li>✗ Following his tour, he <b>appeared to be mentally unstable</b>.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why avoid this?</b> These terms are not only imprecise, but they also imply that a service member is in some way damaged or broken.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Objective, Precise Language</b></p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ A traumatic brain injury left her <b>with cognitive difficulties, including amnesia and confusion</b>.</li> <li>✓ Following his tour, he <b>appeared more agitated and withdrawn</b>.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why this instead?</b> These terms are both clinically descriptive and objective, and imply that a service member can be evaluated and treated.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Words That Suggest Pity or Distress</b></p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Exposure therapy helps <b>victims of</b> PTSD safely face triggers in their environments.</li> <li>✗ Individuals who are <b>suffering from</b> depression may feel fatigue or a lack of energy.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why avoid this?</b> Framing a mental health disorder as an affliction can contribute to stigma. It also makes an assumption about a service member's inner experience of their condition or symptoms. Not every person with a mental health condition suffers or is a victim.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Neutral Descriptions</b></p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Exposure therapy helps <b>people diagnosed with</b> PTSD safely face triggers in their environments.</li> <li>✓ Individuals who are <b>experiencing</b> depression may feel fatigue or a lack of energy.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why this instead?</b> Keeping language objective can prevent judgement or assumptions about how someone's diagnosis affects them.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Mental Health Disorder Labeling</b></p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ <b>Depressed people</b> can't just "stop being sad" or "snap out of it."</li> <li>✗ <b>A mentally disabled veteran</b> is entitled to certain VA benefits.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why avoid this?</b> This kind of wording applies a label to the service member, as though the condition is a defining trait or characteristic.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Person-first Descriptions of Mental Health Disorders</b></p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>People with depression</b> can't just "stop being sad" or "snap out of it."</li> <li>✓ <b>A veteran who received a disability rating due to a mental health condition</b> is entitled to certain VA benefits.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why this instead?</b> Person-first language is preferred when writing about someone with a mental health disorder. It emphasizes that the individual mentioned should be the focus, not the condition or disorder.</i></p>

Substance Use Disorder Labeling	Clinical Descriptions of Substance Use
<p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Most <b>alcoholics</b> need long-term support or professional help.</li> <li>✗ Service members <b>who are drug addicts</b> can seek treatment or rehabilitation programs based on their branch of service.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why avoid this?</b> This kind of wording applies a label to the service member, as if the condition is a defining trait or characteristic. It also implies that the condition is a form of misconduct.</i></p>	<p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Most <b>individuals with alcohol use disorder</b> need long-term support or professional help.</li> <li>✓ Service members <b>with substance use disorder</b> can seek treatment or rehabilitation programs based on their branch of service.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why this instead?</b> Using clinical descriptions clarifies that someone with substance use disorder can be evaluated and treated. This language also emphasizes that the condition is a medical disorder, not one of choice.</i></p>
Language that Implies Instability and Criminal Behavior	Matter-of-Fact Statements
<p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Many individuals who <b>commit suicide</b> had a known mental health condition.</li> <li>✗ Individuals with this condition <b>can be dangerous and unpredictable</b>.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why avoid this?</b> This kind of language reinforces the stereotype that people with mental health disorders are volatile and to be feared, which can contribute to mental health stigma.</i></p>	<p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Many individuals who <b>die by suicide</b> had a known mental health condition.</li> <li>✓ Individuals with this condition <b>may pose a threat to themselves or others</b>.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why this instead?</b> This wording captures the safety concerns related to some mental health conditions or symptoms, without labeling the individual as violent or dangerous. Remember to only describe someone as potentially threatening when it's necessary and appropriate.</i></p>
Outdated Terminology	Current Terminology
<p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ <b>A mental institution</b> can offer more intensive, individualized mental health care.</li> <li>✗ The study examined common <b>mental diseases</b> in military populations, like posttraumatic stress disorder and depression.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why avoid this?</b> These terms aren't consistent with the language currently used by mental health professionals and can be considered derogatory.</i></p>	<p><b>For example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>An inpatient treatment facility</b> can offer intensive, individualized mental health care.</li> <li>✓ The study examined common <b>mental health disorders</b> in military populations, like posttraumatic stress disorder and depression.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>Why this instead?</b> These alternatives reflect the current terminology used by mental health professionals.</i></p>

**Bonus Tip: When writing about suicide, avoid sensationalizing.**

When reporting on a suicide, don't sensationalize the death. Avoid details about the means or method used, calling the death "**tragic**" or "**inexplicable**," and framing it as a crime. Instead, state the facts without glamorizing the cause of death and **emphasize that suicide can be prevented**.

**Bonus Tip: If mental health isn't relevant to the story, avoid including it.**

When writing a story about an individual with a mental health condition or disorder, consider whether that information is relevant before including it in the piece. For example, when covering an Army Captain receiving the Medal of Honor for his service, is it important to **include his mental health diagnosis**? If a mental health condition is not relevant to the story, there's **no need to include it**. However, if you decide that it is, be sure your information is accurate.