MIND YOUR LANGUAGE!

Words matter

Language has power. It both reflects and influences attitudes. A misplaced word can alienate and shame while a well-chosen phrase engages and uplifts. Mind your language and harness the power of words to change lives.

Thrive

2023

Mental health

As mental health gains more coverage, it's vital to be sensitive to the words we use. Prejudicial language stops people seeking help. So, from how we describe mental health conditions to avoiding stigma when creating content, we need to get the language right.
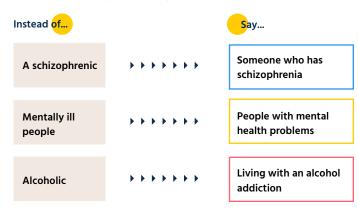
People first

Don't identify people through their diagnosis. Pigeon-holing your audience doesn't acknowledge other aspects of their identity and will alienate them.

Be positive

Don't describe something as being 'wrong' with someone who has mental health problems or use 'normal' as a comparison. And don't use language that suggests people are victims of their condition. So use 'experiences' depression, rather than 'suffers from' it.

Break the stigma

While mental health problems aren't as criminalised as they once were, language has taken a while to catch up.

'Committed suicide' still reflects the historic idea that suicide was a crime committed by a perpetrator. Instead use 'died by suicide' or 'ended their life'.

Similarly, don't use 'released' from a psychiatric hospital, say 'discharged'. Be aware of anything that could suggest wrongdoing.

So, when researching and writing about mental health:

Instead of...		Say...
A schizophrenic	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Someone who has schizophrenia
Mentally ill people	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	People with mental health problems
Alcoholic	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Living with an alcohol addiction

1/2 — Up to half of young adults look to the internet first for help with mental health problems.

0.5 million — The number of mental health service referrals in the UK has gone up by 0.5 million in the past year alone.

1/4 — Yet a quarter of UK adults are still too embarrassed to get medical help for their mental health problems.

Find alternatives for outdated descriptions

Using outdated terms in your writing further stigmatises those who experience mental health problems.

For example, don't say a bad decision is 'lunacy', describe it as absurd or misguided instead.

Research your audience

You may find some people position their diagnosis first to reclaim negative language around mental health, such as the Mad Pride movement.

While that approach isn't appropriate outside this context, it's important to ask your audience what words are right for them. That way your content will be accurate, empathetic and positive.

Menopause

Menopause, when periods stop due to lower hormone levels, is an unavoidable life stage for half the world. Nevertheless, it has too often been a taboo or joke topic. By writing accurately, openly and sensitively about menopause, you can stop the stigma.

Break the taboo

A historic lack of understanding about menopause has meant that many people going through it have felt unsupported at work, or faced relationship breakdown. Words really do matter, so choose yours carefully.

Pick your sources

Menopause tends to attract a lot of misinformation. For example, some companies claim to offer a blood test to check for perimenopause (the time period immediately before menopause), but guidelines say it should be diagnosed based on symptoms alone.

There are also far too many negative myths out there about HRT, sometimes preventing women getting help they might need. So when you're writing about menopause, seek out robust studies and trustworthy sources.

Be sensitive

Menopause, like so many women's health issues, has been dismissed and diminished all too often. For some women, every hot flush is a 'power surge', but others will experience a debilitating range of mental and physical symptoms.

It's crucial to create content with empathy and respect for your whole audience, recognising that every menopause journey is unique and valid.

Get inclusive

Menopause typically happens between 45 and 55, but be mindful that it can affect much younger women (from puberty onwards). This can happen after some surgeries, following chemotherapy or for numerous other reasons.

Plus, while it's important to flag menopause as a neglected women's health issue, remember that many trans men and non-binary people also go through it.

So, when researching and writing about menopause:

Instead of…		Say…
The change	▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸	The menopause
Middle-aged	▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸	Between the ages of 45 and 55
At least you'll no longer get periods	▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸	It's ok to mourn the loss of your fertility
Women have been dealing with this forever!	▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸ ▸	Tell me about your menopause symptoms

45% of women avoid talking to their GP about menopause due to stigma.

43% Women with at least one 'problematic' menopausal symptom are 43% more likely to have left their jobs by the age of 55.

41% of people say their menopause symptoms are treated as a joke by colleagues.

Suggest solutions

Menopause can be challenging, but it is also an inevitable and natural part of life. So give your readers hope and agency by outlining the support that is available. Discuss symptom relief and HRT, and point people towards useful organisations such as Menopause Matters.

Periods

Stigma stops women with period problems getting help, perpetuates misinformation and leads to children missing school. By using better language to talk about periods, we can help smash the taboo.

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Speak plainly about products

There is nothing gross or disgraceful about having a period. Terms such as sanitary products, or women's hygiene products, imply that periods are dirty. They are also unhelpfully vague.

If you need a catch-all phrase to describe tampons, pads, menstrual cups and period pants, it's better to use period products.

Ditch the euphemisms

If periods are discussed at all, people often use euphemisms and slang. This sustains the myth that periods shouldn't be talked about openly, or that they are a joke.

Some women opt to use phrases such as "the painters are in" or "Auntie Flo's here", which is their choice. But as communicators it's our duty to use honest and accurate language.

Be period inclusive

Remember that men need to know about periods, too. Many women also don't have periods, for various reasons, so it's important not to imply that menstruating is a universal female experience.

There will also be many trans men, or non-binary people, who have periods but don't see themselves as women. To be inclusive, you could try using gender-neutral language.

Reflect a range of experiences

People are tired of overly upbeat or misleading period adverts featuring women doing active sports, or depicting menstrual blood as blue liquid. But being overly negative isn't helpful, either.

So, when researching and writing about periods:

Instead of…		Say…
Time of the month	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Your period
Feminine hygiene products	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Period products
Women's problems	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Menstrual health

Tory MP Bill Cash tried to avoid saying the word tampon in the House of Commons…when discussing the tampon tax.

The period emoji, a red droplet symbol, launched in 2019.

More than 1 in 3 boys worldwide think periods should be kept secret.

For some people, periods are a nightmare. For others they are a slight nuisance, while a few might quite enjoy them. It's vital to reflect this range of experience.
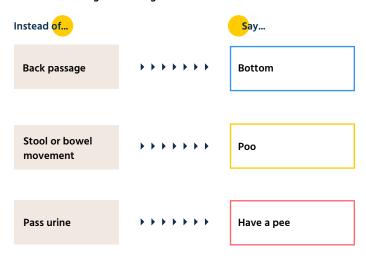
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Bowel and bladder health

Some of our most basic bodily functions can be shrouded in the most medicalised language. Words that are overly formal not only alienate and confuse your audience, they can impact on their health.

When researching and writing about bowel and bladder health:

Instead of…		Say…
Back passage	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	Bottom
Stool or bowel movement	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	Poo
Pass urine	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	Have a pee

More than 1 in 17 people will have bowel cancer during their lifetime

More than 4 in 10 adults struggle to understand health content written for the public

STOOL Nobody used the word 'stools' in a survey run by the NHS

✓ POO People with a learning disability or dyslexia are more likely to use simple words like 'poo'

Consider the technology your audience might be using

People use both 'pee' and 'wee' in preference to 'urine' or 'urinate'. However, because 'wee' can sound like 'we' or the alternative meaning of 'wee' (tiny), it can be confusing for people who use voice technology. While 'pee' does have another possible meaning when spoken aloud, it's not as common, especially in health content!

Think about other terms your audience might hear

Having said all this there are times when you want to include the language that a GP might use with patients, so they understand that you're writing about the same thing. That's fine, just include the terminology in brackets, for example: "you may have piles (haemorrhoids)".

Avoid euphemisms

Talking about pee and poo can be embarrassing and people use humour as a defence. But, while funny euphemisms can make your content relatable, it's best to completely avoid them. Slang phrases aren't universally understood and you could be at risk of alienating your audience even more.

Mind your pees and poos…

And you could make a life-saving difference when it comes to health content. Think about it: someone might not understand rectal bleeding, but they will know if they have blood in their poo.

Weight and obesity

Obesity is among the most misunderstood and stigmatised health conditions. The words and images we use can reinforce this stigma. It's time to change how we talk about weight and obesity.

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The shame game

It's common for people who are overweight or living with obesity to experience language that has shamed them for their condition. Whether it's family, health professionals or in health content. Often this language is well-meant but it can alienate audiences and impact their health further.

Help change the narrative

Oversimplifying the causes can reinforce stigma around people with the condition. So always be aware in your writing that genes, biology, society and psychology all play a role. And fact-check any claims linking overweight and obesity to other health conditions.

When researching and writing about weight and obesity:

- ☑ Use language that acknowledges overweight and obesity as a health condition.

- ☑ Don't suggest individuals are to blame.

- ☑ Avoid negative stereotypes of people with overweight and obesity.

- ☑ Put people first when you write.

- ☑ Be body positive – it's linked to lower depression and better self-care, including healthy eating and exercise.

Use positive images

Language is just one way we can change the narrative around obesity. The media has a history of using images of people with overweight and obesity that reinforce negative stereotypes.

Instead represent people as a whole in your content, not simply as their weight. Show people going about their everyday lives, including images of positivity and happiness.

Instead of…		Say…
Obese or larger size person	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Person with obesity
Dieting will help you lose excess weight	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	Healthy eating can help you feel good and well
Normal weight range	▸▸▸▸▸▸▸	BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 or in the healthy weight range

A note on BMI

There are concerns over using BMI as an oversimplified measure. It's best to avoid it in your health content but that can be difficult. If you need to write about BMI, add some context, like: "BMI is a simple measure that only looks at weight compared to height and not how much of your weight is fat, muscle or bone."

- 💬 More than a quarter of adults in England are living with obesity.

- 💬 Overweight and obesity are defined by BMI but there are concerns over its use.

- 💬 Research shows unhappiness with weight contributes to poor self-esteem.

- 💬 And in a vicious cycle, poor self-esteem and stigma around weight contributes to weight gain.

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Why inclusive content can save lives

Opportunities for health brands to better engage women

How to create engaging health content

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