HOW TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH:
Addressing Misunderstandings about Mental Health in the Media

Stories in the media, such as those told through the news, TV shows, movies, books, and social media sometimes use incorrect or offensive statements to describe mental health conditions. Unfortunately, these wrong ideas can be taken as facts by people who may not know a lot about mental health. It is our goal to use this tip sheet to bust these negative ideas about mental health and people with mental health conditions.

This tip sheet was developed as a collaboration between the Massachusetts Statewide Youth Advisory Council (SYAC) and the Learning and Working Center at the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research (TACR) to clear up some common misunderstandings about mental health conditions and to share strategies to talk about mental health in a more accurate and more helpful way! Read on to learn more about mental health.

MENTAL HEALTH

HOW TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Like everyone, people with mental health conditions need to be treated and referred to with dignity and respect.

"She was acting like such a psycho."

CORRECTION

"She was really upset and was shouting at him."
- ⓘ The word "psycho" is an offensive term referring to a person who experiences psychosis. Just because someone is angry does not mean they are psychotic.[14]
- ⓘ Using this term in this way implies that a person with psychosis is dangerous or violent, neither of which are necessarily true.

"I'm so OCD about keeping my room clean."

CORRECTION

"It's really important to me that I keep my room neat and organized." -from a person that doesn't have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- ⓘ It's not okay to borrow a condition you know you don't truly have. OCD, or any mental health condition, is not something cool, quirky or unique to claim you have if you are not actually living with the condition.

"He's a schizo."

CORRECTION

"A person diagnosed with schizophrenia."
- ⓘ Use "person-first language" when speaking. A person is more than their diagnosis.
- ⓘ *Person-first language* means that when writing or talking about someone you recognize the person first and then the condition or disability.
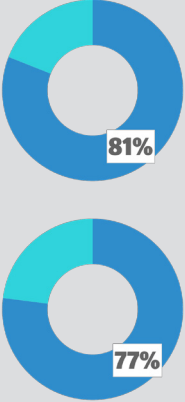
"How do you deal with a bipolar person?"

CORRECTION

"How do you support a person living with bipolar disorder?"
- ⓘ Use positive, strengths-based language when discussing recovery from mental health conditions.

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT PERSONS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

❌ MYTH	✅ FACT
A mental health condition is a personal weakness. Anyone can get over it if they really want to.	Mental health conditions are very common. They are not anyone's "fault." They can be the result of a combination of biological and life experiences like traumatic events. Mental health conditions may affect a person's thinking, feeling or mood.[1] Such conditions may impact someone's ability to relate to others and function each day. People recover from mental health conditions, but may need supports and help to do so.[2]
A mental health condition means that a person is evil or bad, or influenced by the devil.	Mental health conditions do not make people "bad." People with mental health conditions have strengths and talents and make valuable contributions to society like everyone else.
Mental health is only important to people with mental health conditions.	Everyone has mental health and should take care of it just like physical health. It's important to think about mental health as part of your overall well-being and if you notice you are having difficulty seek help.
Work is too stressful for people with mental health conditions and you should not expect them to work.	• Research has shown that work improves one's self-esteem, life satisfaction and, belief in being able to achieve goals and tasks.[3-5] • A recent study found that **81%** of young adults with mental health conditions in the sample *considered working to be important* and **77%** *considered going to school to be important*.[6] • People with mental health conditions can and want to work and succeed with or without supports and accommodations. **Did you know?** *There have been great leaders, scientists, artists, and athletes (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Nikola Tesla, Vincent van Gogh, Metta World Peace, etc.) with mental health conditions.* 81% 77%
Only a few people have mental health conditions.	**Many people live with mental health conditions:** • **20%** of youth ages 13-18 live with a mental health condition.[7] • **1 in 5** adults in America experience mental illness in a given year.[8]
Once someone sees a therapist or goes to the hospital for a mental health condition, they are a sick person.	Having a mental health condition does not define you. You are a person first, just like everyone else.

❌ MYTH	✅ FACT
It's not okay to talk about mental health with people.	You should not be afraid to talk about your or someone else's mental health with friends, family or your doctor. If you notice that someone you care about is having a hard time, find a way to talk to them. *Seize the Awkward* (seizetheawkward.org) has ideas on how to start this conversation.
It's not okay to get help when someone is having a hard time with their mental health.	If you notice that your mental health is causing you to have a hard time doing things, then it's important to get help. Seeing a therapist or a doctor is a good thing. If you were having a hard time breathing, you'd get help.
Having a mental health condition dictates what your life will be like. People with mental health conditions cannot live meaningful lives.	Having a mental health condition does not determine what your life will be like or mean that you will have bad outcomes. **Did you know?** *Prince Harry, Kendrick Lamar, Demi Lovato, Kid Cudi, J. Cole, Halsey, Selena Gomez, Chrissy Teigen, and Lady Gaga all have reported struggling with mental health conditions while having very successful careers and fulfilling lives.*
Mental health conditions are untreatable and people with mental health conditions will always be sick. Once you have a mental health condition, you will have it for the rest of your life.	Mental health conditions are fluid and conditions can change and improve over time.[9] There are many effective treatment methods for mental health conditions, and symptoms can often be improved or managed. Research shows that the sooner that young people receive the right treatment for their mental health condition, the better they will do in the long-term.[10-11]
People with mental health conditions tend to be violent.	People with mental health conditions are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence.[12]
Mental health conditions are the cause of gun violence.	While the media makes people think that having a mental health condition is the cause of gun violence, a recent study has shown that having a mental health condition is not the root cause of gun violence.[13] Instead, having access to firearms and a history of violent behavior are better predictors of gun violence than having a mental health condition.[13]

OTHER TIPS & TRICKS ON HOW TO BE A MENTAL HEALTH ALLY WHILE TALKING WITH OTHERS

- Talk openly about mental health and that it's OK to get help when you need it (if comfortable, share your lived experiences). Talking openly breaks down the stigma that mental health is not something that people should discuss.[15]
- Model more appropriate ways of discussing mental health if a person uses offensive, incorrect, or stigmatizing language.[12]
- If a person shares their strong emotions with you listen without judgement.

WHAT IS THE MASSACHUSETTS STATEWIDE YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL (SYAC)?

The SYAC brings together mental health service providers, and youth and young adults to advise the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health. It is a group of young adults who work together to find equality and to advocate for each other, themselves, and any youth and young adult in the Mass DMH system and the community. They represent youth and young adults with mental illness in the state of Massachusetts through personal experience as peers.

You can learn more about youth and young adult advisory councils for mental health organizations in our *10 Steps to Starting a Young Adult Advisory Council* tip sheets in the resources below.

RESOURCES

- **Active Minds:** https://www.activeminds.org
- **Doors to Wellbeing:** https://www.doorstowellbeing.org/
- **Jed Foundation:** https://www.jedfoundation.org
- **Mental Health America:** https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- **Mental Health First Aid USA:** https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/
- **NAMI - National Alliance on Mental Illness:** https://www.nami.org
- **SAMHSA - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:** https://www.samhsa.gov
- **Seize the Awkward:** https://seizetheawkward.org/
- **Strong 365:** https://strong365.org/
- **Tips and Tricks to Starting a Young Adult Council Part 1: 10 Steps to Starting a Young Adult Advisory Council:** https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1125&context=pib
- **Tips and Tricks to Starting a Young Adult Council Part 2: The Do's and Don'ts of Young Adult Councils:** https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1126&context=pib
- **Youth MOVE National:** https://www.youthmovenational.org

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