

Upholding best-practice language through CMHDARN: A Discussion

The Community Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Research Network (CMHDARN) Project is a partnership project between the MHCC, NADA and the Mental Health Commission of NSW. CMHDARN was established in 2010 to broaden involvement of the community mental health and alcohol and other drug sectors in practice-based research and to promote the value of research and evidence in practice.

The overall aim of the Network is to:

- improve the service quality, and correspondingly outcomes for consumers/ service users of community-managed services
- promote increased awareness and understanding of co-existing mental health and alcohol and other drugs issues.

CMHDARN aims to facilitate the development of a culture of research by providing opportunities for the exchange of ideas, sharing resources, support and collaboration among community organisations working in mental health and AOD and between community organisations and research bodies, including universities and research institutes.

During CMHDARN projects and activities, discussions about the language utilised regularly comes into focus. It is acknowledged that there is great difficulty in meeting the diverse preferences of people with lived experience of mental health conditions, AOD service users, carers and supporters, the workforce, academia as well as multiple stakeholders across the service system and government, particularly when convening meetings, writing papers, presenting and developing resources.

In September 2021, a small, targeted consultation was held to discuss this issue with a number of diverse lived experience participants to inform CMHDARN's use of language. The aim is that whilst recognising that language is always a fluid and evolving dynamic, that CMHDARN remains inclusive and continues to role model best practice language in the work it undertakes across the mental health and AOD community-managed sectors.

The consultation aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is your preferred language for CMHDARN to use moving forward when writing or speaking about people living with co-existing mental health conditions and substance use?
2. What is the most inclusive language for CMHDARN to use moving forward when discussing carers, families, supporters, and kinship groups?
3. Context often effects how we need to use language in policy reform, advocacy, and research activities. Nevertheless, are there better ways we can acknowledge the fluidity of language whilst accepting that we need to settle on terminology, at a particular time; without it leading to difficulties that can overtake the purpose of a meeting or activity?

The key theme to emerge was the importance of acknowledging that people with lived experience of mental health conditions and substance use are first and foremost 'people'. Meeting participants discussed how terms such as 'consumer' and 'service user', while derived from movements advocating a shift of power and maximising the choice and control of people with living with mental health conditions and substance use, can be stigmatising and divisive as well as empowering and aspirational. Additionally, the terminology often fails to characterise the spectrum of experience and is unrepresentative of how many people would identify themselves. The language most favoured in the discussion was "people with co-occurring conditions".

The discussion also identified the importance of ensuring that language is not confounded by medicalised language use in mental health and substance use. This was highlighted as an important principle for CMHDARN to role model to the two sectors working together. Stepping away from terms such as 'co-morbid' or insight were particularly identified as examples of medical language which gives rise to negative connotations.

The importance of acknowledging the fluidity of language was also discussed in the context of the need to use language that meets contextual needs. It was well accepted by those engaged in the conversation that being mindful of the context of events is key. Whatever the context, intended audience or required referencing protocol, modifying language to correspond with the intention is important, i.e., matching the wording used in legislation when developing policy submissions surrounding legal reform.

The notion of context further emphasised the fluidity of where people with co-occurring conditions are in their wellness journey, and that despite living with a mental health condition, that people may experience distress, may be assessed as mentally ill under the legislation, or may be feeling well and are doing well in the community. They may also have co-occurring conditions that they are struggling with or managing well.

The variability of identifying language was also a theme discussed in relation to the language referring to carers, families, kinship groups and communities. In the consultation, highlighted of importance was the acknowledgment of the transient nature of the caring relationship for many family members and partners. Likewise, the importance of acknowledging the significance of informal relationships in aiding and supporting the day-to-day functioning for many people living with co-occurring conditions.

Perfecting the use of language is mostly aspirational and unattainable, however clearly outlining the intended use with the purpose of upholding the dignity of people with co-occurring conditions and their supports will support best-practice across the mental health and AOD sectors in which CMHDARN traverses.

Useful Language Resources

Mental Health Coordinating Council's [Recovery Oriented Language Guide \(2nd Edition\)](#)

Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies [Language Matters](#)

CMHDARN gratefully acknowledge those participants who engaged in the recent language discussion. We thank them for their time and for sharing their valuable knowledge and expertise, and for supporting CMHDARN's objective to more accurately represent the voice of people with living with co-occurring conditions and their supporters in its endeavours.



Katy Sam

CMHDARN Project Coordinator

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