



Language plays a critical role in how people perceive the world. In the field of Behavioral Health Service Provision, words are our primary tool to describe the behaviors, actions, and interactions with others. These words get captured in documentation as a part of an individual's and/or family's record and often not only describes reality but shapes it. Words can influence us unknowingly, and can alter our perceptions of others, positively, or negatively. When documenting services delivered to individuals and families, providers need to take care to ensure the words they use are not harmful. Utilizing language that is respectful, emphasizes the individual's or family's unique needs and strengths, and refrains from using narrow and negative labels will not only support quality documentation, but quality services as well. Words are powerful tools that must be used with great intention.

Below is a list of some commonly used terminology in the Behavioral Health Field. Review the following words and consider the following:

- What types of messages might be communicated about the individual or family by the words on the left vs the words on the right?
- How do you think the individual or family would feel if a provider described them using the words on the left vs the words on the right?
- How might you modify the words on the left when documenting in an individual's or family's record to be more strengths based?
- How would you prefer to be described?

DEFICIT BASED	STRENGTHS BASED
Frequent Flyer	Utilizes services and supports when necessary
Hostile/Aggressive	Protective
Manipulative	Resourceful
Resistant	Ambivalent, Uncertain
Abuses the system	Good Self Advocate
Unmotivated	Uninterested
Non-Compliant	Not in agreement with, prefers alternative strategies
Entitled	Aware of one's rights
Helpless	Unaware of capabilities
Hopeless	Unaware of opportunities
Unfit parent	Experiencing barriers to more positive parenting
Weakness	Barriers to change or needs
Suffering with	Working to recover from; experiencing; living with

“Words create worlds.” – Unknown

Now you can try this for yourself... here is a chance to put your new learned knowledge to the test. The only way we can change language and get used to using strength based language is by practicing. You could also use this as a team building activity, emphasizing that everyone is learning together. Remember that as professionals, how we view someone and speak about them is how we see them, treat them and lastly help or harm them with our words and actions. While doing this activity I encourage you and invite you to think about you or a loved one when working on the strength based/ recovery oriented answers. Overall, have fun!



The tool “*The Glass Half Empty, The Glass Half Full*” can be accessed through this link:

<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DMHAS/Publications/PCRPLanguagepdf.pdf>

RESOURCES

Person-Centered Language - Center for Practice Transformation. (2022, May 19). Center for Practice Transformation. <https://practicetransformation.umn.edu/practice-tools/person-centered-language/>

Person-Centered language. (n.d.). Mental Health America. <https://mhanational.org/person-centered-language>

Tondora, et al., (2007). Yale University School of Medicine Program for Recovery and Community Health. New Haven, CT.

<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DMHAS/Publications/PCRPLanguagepdf.pdf>

SAMHSA (2023) Guide to Equity Terminology: Promoting Behavioral Health Equity through the Words We Use <https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/guide-to-equity-terminology>