

Facebook post by the Steinberg Institute
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“As the Executive Director of the Steinberg Institute, I pay close attention to how people talk about mental illness.

In the public policy arena, the term used most frequently when referring to mental illness and substance use disorder is “Behavioral Health.” I have spent a good amount of time thinking about this term and, quite frankly, I find the term inaccurate, if not offensive.

The common understanding of the term “behavior” infers an action that one has chosen. “Her behavior was inappropriate” is an example. But when someone who lives with an anxiety disorder has an anxiety attack, would you refer to that as a behavior? How about when someone who lives with schizophrenia hears voices? Would you refer to that as a behavior?

I have come to the decision that using the word “behavior” when referring to a mental illness isn’t appropriate. It sounds as if one could ‘snap out of it’ or make a different choice. Could you imagine, telling your son who lives with schizophrenia to stop hearing voices? “Come on son, just stop it!”

We would never refer to a heart attack as a behavior. Nor would we tell someone having a heart attack to stop behaving that way. We wouldn’t call diabetes, cancer, or blindness a behavior either. Why on earth would we call mental illness a behavior?

This may seem like a small matter, but just as others have in the past, I think that the words we use matter – especially when these words are adopted by the entire society. We can all remember a time when words were used against various groups of people that we have since realized are offensive and oppressive. Sadly, in the world of mental health, there are many words that – when used casually, or out of context, are equally offensive.

It’s time that we think before we speak when referring to the challenges our brothers, sisters, and friends live with day in and day out. Mental illness isn’t a behavior. It’s an illness that deserves the same tender care and thoughtfulness we give to people who live with cancer, diabetes, and other illnesses. #wordsmatter #joinourmovement”