

# Why You Should Stop Saying ‘Committed Suicide’

*The phrase is stigmatizing in a lot of outdated, insensitive ways.*

**By Lindsay Holmes**

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Your words matter, especially when it comes to mental health. One phrase that you may not be aware is particularly egregious? “Committed suicide.”

It’s an expression that many people still lean on, both in the news (take one look at [headlines](#) after the deaths by suicide of [Parkland, Florida, students](#) and [the father](#) of a Sandy Hook shooting victim) and in outside conversations.



Jutta Kuss via Getty Images

While the term may seem innocuous, it’s actually laden with blame and stigma. So much so that reporting guidelines [outlined by mental health and media organizations](#) strictly advise against using it.

“The term ‘committed suicide’ is damaging because for many, if not most, people it evokes associations with ‘committed a crime’ or ‘committed a sin’ and makes us think about something morally reprehensible or illegal,” said Jacek Debiec, an assistant professor in the University of Michigan’s department of psychiatry who specializes in post-traumatic stress and anxiety disorders.

The phrase “committed suicide” also ignores the fact that suicide is often the consequence of an unaddressed illness (like depression, trauma or another mental health issue). It should be regarded in the same way as any physical health condition, said Dan Reidenberg, the executive director of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education.

“You don’t ‘commit a heart attack.’ Instead, you might hear someone say they ‘died from a heart attack.’ Dying by suicide is the same. ... When attaching the word ‘committed,’ it further discriminates against those who lost their battle against a disease,” he explained.

Reidenberg added that the best phrase to use is “died by suicide,” since it sends the message that the death was caused by the mental health condition. It’s the preferred language in media stories, and it’s worth using in everyday discussions as well.

## Why This Matters In The Long Term

It might sound like nitpicking to focus on just two words. However, word choices — whether intentional or unintentional — have much broader implications.

Using sensitive mental health vernacular is [crucial to eliminating negative stereotypes](#) attached to mental illness (and the consequences of those stereotypes) now and in the future. Research shows that when stigma is present, [people avoid seeking help](#) — help that could be life-saving.

“The fact that we are having problems with choosing words when speaking about suicide reflects our deeper problems with understanding mental health in general,” Debiec said.

“The language [we use] reflects our system of values, both conscious and unconscious,” he continued. “Using a judgmental or degrading language prevents us from recognizing mental health problems, seeking help and providing help.”

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- Jacek Debiec, Assistant Professor,  
University Of Michigan Psychiatry Department

Simply put, “committed suicide” conveys shame and wrongdoing; it doesn’t capture the pathology of the condition that ultimately led to a death. It implies that the person who died was a perpetrator rather than a victim. And you don’t have to live with a mental health condition to understand how that could be damaging.

“Words have consequences,” Debiec said. “I would encourage people who think that language around mental health is not important to think about their own experiences when they felt that somebody’s judgment or words unfairly and deeply hurt them.”

It’s time that we start looking at suicide as a dangerous byproduct of a health condition that can — and should — be prevented. That, of course, requires treatment. But it also includes paying attention to our words so that those living with a mental health issue feel they won’t be alienated for speaking up and seeking support, Reidenberg said.

He noted that suicide is a leading cause of death in the United States. “Suicide is a serious public health crisis. More people die by suicide than by homicides and car accidents and breast cancer,” he added. “Suicide is a real issue that must be taken seriously all of the time.”

Reidenberg said he hopes that more people will be more compassionate about suicide, and not just after a high-profile suicide but every single day.

“Let’s keep working to prevent tragedies from happening, celebrate those who are still alive ... and do all that we can to break down the stigma surrounding mental health and suicide,” he said. “It is only by talking about these that we will get people to open up before a tragedy happens.”

Dropping the phrase “committed suicide” as part of this effort may be a tiny step — but at least it’s one that’s forward.

*If you or someone you know needs help, call 1-800-273-8255 for the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#). You can also text HOME to 741-741 for free, 24-hour support from the [Crisis Text Line](#). Outside the U.S., please visit the [International Association for Suicide Prevention](#) for a database of resources.*

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