

# ◀ LANGUAGE ▶ MATTERS

## Our language matters

The words we choose to talk to or about people with diabetes are important, especially when they're our friends or whānau. Words don't just reflect reality; they often create it.

This means that the language we use in relation to diabetes can impact the physical and emotional wellbeing of people who are living with diabetes,

either in a positive or negative way. What we say can have a direct effect on whether someone feels like a failure, as opposed to being empowered to look after themselves and manage their diabetes.

Words influence how other people view people who are living with or are at risk of developing diabetes, too.

Depending on the language that's used, this can either contribute to or help lessen the discrimination, isolation and stigma that people living with diabetes commonly feel and experience.

There is evidence the current language used in the media, healthcare setting and our communities around diabetes is problematic and can affect how motivated and empowered people with diabetes feel about managing their condition.

Our words show we care about our loved ones and people we know living with diabetes.

## Attitude matters!

As well as what we say, how we say it matters. Body language, tone of voice and attitude also communicate care, empathy and understanding.



# Choose your words wisely

## When talking about diabetes or people with diabetes:

*Use person-first language to describe an individual with diabetes.*

Instead of using the term 'a diabetic' consider referring to an individual who has diabetes as a 'person living with diabetes'. This reduces stigma.

*Avoid phrases that include words such as 'suffer', 'afflicted', 'disease'*

These words may attract attention but have negative connotations and are, often, based on incorrect assumptions.

## When talking to people with diabetes:

*Use positive language that focuses on achievement.*

Genuine praise and encouragement in the appropriate setting is a powerful motivator.

*Avoid phrases such as:  
'Should you be eating that?!' or  
'Why are your readings high?  
(What have you been eating?)'*

These phrases are challenging and loaded with judgement.

People with diabetes should be respected and supported.

## What people with diabetes experience:

*"Okay so my blood sugars aren't perfect, but I'm trying my best here!"*

*"No one chooses diabetes"*

*"Who are you to judge me?  
If you were in my shoes..."*

*"She said I was a bad diabetic... that makes me feel like a bad person..."*

*"It's not my fault I have diabetes!"*

# What is stigma?



## Stigma is a type of rejection or judgment.

In general, stigma refers to the experiences of exclusion, rejection, prejudice, and blame that people unfairly experience based on a characteristic or perceived difference. Stigma may appear as negative attitudes or outright discrimination. It can be external, coming from other people and society, or it can be internal, meaning an attitude you hold about yourself.

Diabetes stigma stems from the idea that poor choices and unhealthy behaviours cause diabetes. Many people with diabetes experience misplaced judgment and blame.

## Let's work together to reduce stigma

**The way we communicate about diabetes, and the language we use when talking about diabetes, often stigmatises people with diabetes and contributes to discrimination.**

People with diabetes may feel misunderstood or judged by others because of the language used around their condition. This can lead to less willingness to share their thoughts or be open with others about how they manage their diabetes. This in turn can impact their emotional and physical wellbeing.

## Let's change the kōrero

**By changing the way we talk about diabetes, we can improve health outcomes and help support people with diabetes to manage their health well. If you are someone living with diabetes that includes the way you might talk to yourself.**



# Let's change the kōrero

## 1. Start with how you talk to others

- Be aware of the words you use every day and take your language seriously – language is personal and so is diabetes. Think carefully about how your words might be heard and understood by others. Be aware your words may not be interpreted in the way you intend.
- Remember that language reflects attitude – do not use words when talking or writing about people with diabetes that you would not use when talking with them.
- Choose to create new habits – you may need to make conscious, deliberate choices.
- Choose to be respectful and inclusive, not stigmatising, and exclusive.
- Be aware that we all have unconscious biases – try to minimise these.

## 2. Have the courage to call out inappropriate words and language

- You can accept or ignore it, or you can challenge it – if you hear or read words that are inappropriate, make your views clear. Often, people don't realise their words are inappropriate, so it is helpful to point out why it is not okay, and why you are suggesting the change.
- Change it – if you read words that are inappropriate, and you have the opportunity, make the author aware and suggest they change it.
- Focus on the behaviour and avoid labelling – remember to be respectful, assume the person meant no harm and be constructive in your critique.
- Appeal to the person's better judgment – e.g. "I'm sure you didn't mean to suggest...", "Perhaps you haven't thought about it before, but..."

## 3. Remember, our words have power

- We all communicate every day – small changes in the way we do this can make a big difference.

- Communication is the area where we all have the least training – we can all practice use of new words and language – it may seem to take more time but soon it flows smoothly in conversation and writing.
- Communication needs careful attention – but it's not 'rocket science' either. We can all do better in communicating about diabetes.

## 4. Think about how you talk to yourself

- For someone with diabetes, self-talk, or your "inner voice" is also very important. How you talk to yourself will have an impact on your emotions, the way you feel and your physical health too.
- Feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or worried about your diabetes is a natural response to the emotional burden of living with diabetes. That also applies to the language we hear and the way you talk to yourself. Remembering this can also help ease stress and make it easier to manage your diabetes each day.
- Be kind to yourself. Think about how you would react if someone in your whānau or a friend had diabetes and was feeling worried, overwhelmed or angry about their condition. You would most likely give them a hug, tell them not to be so hard on themselves and offer them your support. Treat yourself the same way you would treat a friend in the same position – with care, kindness and compassion.
- Set an achievable goal. Even if you are doing everything "right" it can be difficult to be satisfied if you are trying to be perfect. Simply focus on what you can control or do, to help yourself rebalance those negative thoughts in your head.
- Stop the cycle. When you recognise your self-talk and thoughts are negative or spiralling out of control, think about some activities that will help you interrupt those thoughts and make you feel calmer.