

Power of Language : A tool to guide language in the context of multiple disadvantage

Overview

This paper provides a suggested framework for using language in the context of multiple disadvantage. The framework is based on the learning and journey of the Fulfilling Lives Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham programme, and seeks to embed an understanding of the power of language and the words we choose.

Introduction to the programme

Fulfilling Lives Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is part of the National Fulfilling Lives Programme focusing on multiple disadvantage.

We acknowledge that the system doesn't work for everyone – particularly people who experience greater levels of disadvantage.

We often hear the narrative "people are hard to reach/people don't engage" - we don't buy into this. Our focus is on changing the system and its behaviour rather than blaming the people trying to access support.

Our purpose is

- **Co-production:** Giving equal value to the voices of *both* the decision makers and the people we support, so that all opinions are heard and respected equally
- **Service delivery:** Working alongside people and services learning and testing different interventions to change the lives of people experiencing multiple disadvantages for the better – now and in the future
- **System change:** Make an impact on the way people are supported - by influencing policy and practice, locally and nationally

Language

Language is a very powerful tool for social change, both positive and negative. Language creates reality as we know words have power. The language we use needs to be carefully considered and must stand for the Fulfilling Lives LSL core principles - if we don't pay attention to it, it can create labels and stereotypes which adds to a negative narrative that is often not correct about a person we support and/or work alongside and contributes to stigma and discrimination.

Principles

- **Be strengths focused** - Don't talk in needs, deficits and risk as an opening line— what are the assets and strengths and a person's protective factors – What may be seen by one person as a negative behaviour can be reframed to coping strategies. This does not mean excusing the behaviour or not measuring the risk or downplaying actions rather consider the trauma experiences

- **Be human** - Consider the full picture of the person/ group of people - their strengths social connectedness, community contributions, political spiritual etc Talk of their own agency as opposed to just needs
- **Be kind and compassionate in the tone we use**– think about the words we use that are kind and compassionate
- **See the full picture** – it is the programmes responsibility to address and compassionately challenge stigma and discrimination experienced by the people we work alongside and support others to see their full picture - compassionately challenge misperceptions including our own
- **No size fits all** – everyone is an individual with different strengths and assets
- **Sense of identity and connectedness and belonging** of to their communities such as personal, spiritual, religion political, social, cultural - not just service or needs led
- **Don't objectify** – using the word "our" ambassador objectifies the person (could also apply to teams etc)
- Understand the label/diagnosis but **don't label the whole person** – for example a person diagnosed with schizophrenia NOT a person who is schizophrenic
- **Listen deeply** - Everyone has sparkly moments when you truly listen!
- **Be aware of our own unconscious bias** - Think about the presenting behaviours within a context and try to understand their experience through their experience rather than our own perception
- **Systemic understanding and system learning**
- **Reframe behaviours and acknowledge that they are contextual**, for example - coping strategies to survive
- **Informed approaches** – we commit to being on a learning journey to understand the impact of people's experiences for them such as the understanding of trauma, intersectionality and cultural humility
- **Solution focused** – breeding negativity feeds it and we are all equally responsible for the impact we have on others – if there is a problem – talk about it to the right person and seek solutions
- **Relational** – often the needs of the person is focused on when we should also focus on the relationships that are equally important - those relationships that are visible or not, that can be repaired or ruptured
- **Understand intersecting identities** – acknowledge and understand people's experiences are impacted by intersecting identities

Words we agree on at Fulfilling Lives LSL

Words Dos:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing multiple disadvantages described for the purpose of the programme as interconnecting experiences of mental ill health, homelessness or insecure housing, substance use and or history of offending - experience of exploitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People we work alongside or people we support - not labels such as beneficiaries, clients, service users
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People accessing services - (outside of FLLSL) not labels such as beneficiaries, clients, service users
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who experience multiple disadvantages replaces people who faces multiple disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance use not substance misuse or abuse (misuse is judgemental)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners not “frontline workers” – provides equality to the professional work the different teams do and moves away from an image of conflict
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Areas of improvements not weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Person led rather than person centred
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Street based sex work rather than sex work generally
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental ill health rather than mental health issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact with the criminal justice system rather than offending behaviour
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples for describing and identifying identities in a way that recognises power dynamics:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black, Asian and minoritised groups
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGBTQI+
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An individual living with disability

Don't label (see below list)

Words Don'ts:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not use a Person with Complex needs – it's not the person that is complex it's the system that is complex to navigate and access or we work in silos which makes the system and the response we provide complex to receive.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not use challenging behaviour - it's communication - People communicate in different ways which can be expressive – explain how it's being expressed or communicated -name the behaviour not the person, name how you are feeling about the behaviour
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-dependent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chaotic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-engager
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Junkie
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clean
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is Complex / Has complex needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prostitute
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personality Disorder
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sex worker – activity not person
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too risky
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attention seeking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chooses to live this way
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nothing we can do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They don't want to change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schizophrenic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addict
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neglectful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not helping themselves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manipulative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aggressive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lifestyle choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health labels - mad, crazy, psycho etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beneficiaries/clients/ service users
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rough sleeper – person sleeping on the streets