

# Words Matter

## How to Change Language Around Eating Disorders

It is important to think about person-centered language when you discuss or describe eating disorders. Some words and phrases used in clinical practice or in healthcare may be commonplace, but have the potential to cause stigma. The terms below are suggestions to consider in discussions about eating disorders.

### Words That Should Not Be Used

Some eating disorder terminology is diagnostic in nature and should not be used to refer to an individual. When you call a person 'anorexic' or 'bulimic' it implies that a person is defined by their diagnosis. This can cause stigma.

⊗ "This person is anorexic"	✔ "The individual has anorexia nervosa"
⊗ "A bulimic person"	✔ "A person with bulimia nervosa"

The term '*bulimic episode*' was intended to refer to eating behavior in which there is a loss of control. A less stigmatizing term to consider is '*binge-eating episode*.'

Use the full term of '*binge eating*' rather than '*binging*' or '*bingeing*.' The latter terms can refer to other behaviors not specific to eating disorders, such as 'binge drinking' or 'binge watching.'

### Frequently Misused Words

**The term anorexia is not the same as anorexia nervosa.** The two terms have slightly different meanings. Anorexia means a loss of appetite, while anorexia nervosa is the clinical name of the eating disorder.

**Bulimia is not the same as bulimia nervosa.** Bulimia means an abnormal or constant craving for food. Bulimia nervosa is the clinical term used for the eating disorder.

### Think About Using Different Words

#### Suffers from or struggles with an eating disorder

Use terms like '*treatment-seeking*' or '*enrolled in a treatment program*' to describe patients or individuals. Also, consider '*exhibiting an eating disorder or related symptoms*' for patients or individuals who have a clinically documented eating disorder. These terms are less emotionally charged.

**These terms are offered as suggestions when you discuss patients or individuals who have eating disorders. This is not an all-inclusive list and may need to be updated at some point in the future.**

Source: Weissman, R.S., Becker, A.E., Bulik, C.M., Frank, G.K.W., Klump, K.L., Steiger, H., Strober, M., Thomas, J., Waller, G. and Walsh, B.T. (2016), Speaking of that: Terms to avoid or reconsider in the eating disorders field. *Int. J. Eat. Disord.*, 49: 349-353. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22528>

#### Funding Statement

Funding for the National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders was made possible by Grant No. H79SM081924 from SAMHSA of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, SAMHSA/HHS, or the U.S. Government.