Coping with mental health issues in society

Pejorative misuse of terms – BBC, 10/10/11

Mental health terms like “autistic”, “bipolar” and “schizophrenic” have all been adopted by the press and society as a whole, in jest, to describe character traits of otherwise healthy people and things. For example, are you very tidy? You’re OCD. A bit awkward in social situations? Definitely autism. The weather can’t make up its mind? Never mind alternating bands of high and low pressure, it’s bipolar. These analogies are entrenched in our language to the point of being cliché, but to many they are still very offensive, increasing social stigma and confusion over mental health conditions.

Sources as varied as the Observer Newspaper (referring to Gok Wan’s “schizophrenic” dress sense, Dec 2010), the IMF (a “bipolar” global economy, Sep 2011) and Katie Price (“I am quite OCD about my perfume habits”, spoken from court while on a careless driving charge, Sep 2010) all misuse these words, and a 2007 study suggested that 11% of references to schizophrenia in the UK press were metaphorical – the remaining 89% being about the actual condition. The US (28%), Switzerland (31%) and Germany (58%) were all worse.

Nonetheless, Arun Chopra, a consultant psychiatrist at Queen’s Medical Centre in Nottingham and the author of the British research, believes the tendency has a negative impact on the treatment of patients.

He argues that deploying terms in such a way contributes to public misunderstanding - for instance, reinforcing the false notion that schizophrenia is a "Jekyll and Hyde" illness related to split personalities.

Moreover, he says it can be deeply upsetting to patients and their families, and recalls seeing a woman whose son was diagnosed with the condition bursting into tears when she read a newspaper article which described the weather as "schizophrenic".

"The use of the word as a metaphor is tremendously damaging," Chopra adds. "It's part of the process of creating a stigma around mental illness.

As such, he says he would like the Oxford English Dictionary to remove its secondary definition of schizophrenic: "With the implication of mutually contradictory or inconsistent elements".

Of course, deploying medical language to describe character traits is hardly a new phenomenon. Words like cretin and lunatic were originally formal terms to describe specific conditions before they more commonly came to be used pejoratively.

However, not all those affected by frequently misapplied conditions object to their use in this manner.
The Daily Telegraph columnist Bryony Gordon, who has been diagnosed with OCD, says she frequently has to point out that her disorder involves more than simply cleaning her house.

But she feels that attempting to clamp down on this kind of use of the term veers close to political correctness - and, moreover, that she is grateful the condition is, at least, widely discussed.

"It doesn’t offend me when people trivialise it," she says. "It’s almost a vehicle to talk about it.

"In a way it’s a good thing because people acknowledge it exists. You’re stuck in your own head and to see other people making light of something makes you think, ‘Ah, this is what’s happening.’ It makes you feel better about it."

Most advocates for such conditions disagree, however.

Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, argues that using a clinical diagnosis to describe minor personality traits can only serve to fuel misunderstanding.

"The upside is that we have moved on from a fear of mentioning these things at all, but it is a tiny step forward," he says. "The trouble is these terms all come to mean the same thing. Then they become as unpleasant as describing someone with schizophrenia as a lunatic.

"The reality is we still have a long way to go when it comes to educating people about mental health. People might use these terms more frequently now but the stigma of having a mental illness is as bad as it has ever been."

Still, attempts by some mental health service users to reclaim pejorative labels under the banner of so-called "mad pride" demonstrate that there is unlikely to ever be consensus about the best way to respond.

The flippant use of such terms nowadays may offend some and not bother others. But such a dynamic is part of the words’ evolution, says Joel Rose, director of OCD Action.

"Five years ago people wouldn’t have known what you were talking about if you mentioned OCD," he says. "Now they have a sense of what it is about and use it, but don’t really fully understand it. The next five years will be about working to fully educate people.

"What we want people to understand is how serious and debilitating OCD can be. We’re talking about people who might clean a floor repeatedly for eight hours or someone who can’t leave the house. It’s not having a tidy house or arranging the tins of food in your cupboard. We also want to get across that it is treatable."

Indeed, many of those diagnosed with the condition have successfully learned to manage it. Overcoming its metaphorical use, however, may prove more difficult.