

Mental Health Words in Plain Language

**PALM TREE
COVERING**

A language bridge for words you may hear in Australian mental-health care.

A NOTE ABOUT WORDS

Clinical words should be explained - not hidden.

Mental-health language can feel confusing. Some words have specific clinical meanings. This guide gives a practical starting explanation, not a diagnosis or complete legal or clinical definition.

Mental health

A dimension of health involving emotional, psychological and social wellbeing and functioning. Everyone has mental health, and it can change.

Mental wellbeing

How someone is functioning and experiencing connection, purpose and day-to-day life. It does not mean being happy or productive all the time.

Mental distress

Difficult thoughts, feelings or bodily experiences that cause concern or discomfort. Distress can occur with or without a diagnosed disorder.

Mental-health difficulty / problem

Broad educational language for experiences affecting wellbeing or functioning when a diagnosis is unknown.

Mental disorder

A clinically significant disturbance in thinking, emotional regulation or behaviour, usually linked with distress or impaired functioning.

Mental illness / condition

Common terms for clinically significant or diagnosed conditions. People may prefer different language for their own experience.

PALM TREE REMINDER

Mental health and mental illness are related, but they are not the same thing. A diagnosis does not define the whole person.

Words About Assessment & Recovery



Understanding language used to describe what may be happening.

UNDERSTANDING CLINICAL LANGUAGE

Observation, experience and clinical conclusions are different.

Knowing the difference can help people ask questions without turning ordinary distress into a diagnosis.

Signs

Changes another person may observe, such as withdrawal, behaviour change or difficulty with usual routines.

Symptoms

Experiences reported by the person, such as low mood, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, pain or sleep difficulty.

Diagnosis

A clinical conclusion made by an appropriately qualified professional using assessment information and diagnostic criteria.

Assessment

A process of gathering information to understand concerns, health, functioning, safety and support needs.

Psychological distress

A broad term for emotional suffering or symptoms such as worry, low mood or agitation. It does not automatically mean mental illness.

Recovery

A personal process of living a meaningful life and building wellbeing, with or without ongoing symptoms. Recovery is not always linear.

PALM TREE REMINDER

One sign or symptom is not proof of a mental disorder. Leave diagnosis to appropriately qualified professionals.

Who Does What?

Common professional roles you may hear about in Australia.



PEOPLE IN THE SYSTEM

Different professionals have different roles.

Ask what the professional does, what the appointment involves, what qualifications or registration apply and what it will cost.

GP / general practitioner

A medical doctor who can assess mental and physical health, provide treatment, discuss Mental Health Treatment Plan eligibility and refer.

Psychologist

A registered health professional trained in psychological assessment and therapies. Psychologists are not medical doctors and do not prescribe medicines.

Psychiatrist

A medical doctor with specialist training in psychiatry who can assess and diagnose mental disorders, treat and prescribe medicines.

Counsellor

A professional who supports people to explore difficulties, emotions and coping. Counsellors are not nationally regulated in the same way as psychologists.

Social worker

A professional who may provide counselling, advocacy, psychosocial assessment and practical support with social issues.

Pharmacist

A registered health professional who supplies medicines and can explain safe use, interactions, side effects and Consumer Medicine Information.

PALM TREE REMINDER

Ask if you are unsure: What is this professional's role? What happens at the first appointment? Do I need a referral? What will it cost?

Words About Access & Services

Terms that can affect how you enter, use and pay for support.



NAVIGATING SUPPORT

Understanding the system supports informed choice.

These terms often appear when booking appointments or discussing Medicare, privacy and language access.

Mental Health Treatment Plan

A structured plan prepared by an eligible medical practitioner for a person who meets Better Access requirements. The plan and referral are related but not the same document.

Referral

A formal request from a health professional for another professional or service to assess or treat you. Not every service requires one.

Medicare rebate

An amount Medicare contributes toward an eligible service. A rebate does not automatically mean the appointment is free.

Bulk billing

When a provider accepts the Medicare benefit as full payment for an eligible service, leaving no out-of-pocket fee for that service.

Confidentiality

The expectation that personal information is kept private, subject to relevant legal and safety exceptions. Ask the service to explain its rules.

Interpreter / translator

An interpreter supports spoken or signed communication. A translator works with written information. Professional language support differs from relying on family.

PALM TREE REMINDER

You can ask for a word, fee, referral requirement or service process to be explained again.

Questions You Can Ask



You do not need to understand every mental-health term before asking for help.

USE YOUR OWN WORDS

Ask for information in a way that makes sense to you.

Health and mental-health services use specialised language. It is reasonable to ask what a term means, why it matters and what your options are.

- 1 What does that word mean in plain language?
- 2 Is that a diagnosis, a possibility, or something you are still assessing?
- 3 What happens at the first appointment?
- 4 Do I need a referral?
- 5 Is there a cost, Medicare rebate or gap fee?
- 6 Can I use a professional interpreter?
- 7 What happens to the information I share?
- 8 What are my choices if this service is not the right fit?

EVIDENCE & SOURCE CHECK

Palm Tree Module 1 Evidence Matrix; Healthdirect Australia mental-health professional information; Australian Government Better Access guidance. Education only - practical explanations, not complete clinical or legal definitions.