

First Mental Health Metaphor Dictionary to raise awareness of disorders

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Metaphors are not just literary devices for writers to embellish their texts. They are linguistic tools used in everyday life, in most cases with the aim of better understanding and conveying the reality of the world around us.

Researchers at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) have now developed the first Mental Health Metaphor Dictionary, a pioneering repository that brings together and exemplifies the most important conceptual metaphors used in Spanish by people with serious [mental illnesses](#), mainly schizophrenia, [bipolar disorder](#), depression and [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#).

The repository is based on first-person accounts of what it is like to live with a particular mental disorder and can be useful for mental health communicators and professionals, relatives of people diagnosed with one of these illnesses and even for the people with these disorders themselves. The dictionary is presented in an article [published](#) in *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*.

According to Marta Coll-Florit and Salvador Climent Roca, researchers from the Linguistic Applications Interuniversity Research Group (GRIAL) of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, who coordinated the development and creation of the repository, "This is a tool to raise visibility and awareness in society about the suffering of people with mental illnesses. We believe that this dictionary can help us all to reflect on the way we talk about mental health and to realize the power of our words."

Metaphors are not neutral

The dictionary is one of the results of the [MOMENT](#) project, which seeks to identify the metaphors used in the field of mental health and the underlying conceptualizations. The researchers said, "The metaphors we use are not neutral, but have the power to highlight certain aspects of reality while potentially obscuring others. They're likely to reveal latent ideas that don't come out explicitly in our discourse, but may be filtered through figurative language."

"For example, it's not the same to say 'you have to fight your illness' as it is to say 'you have to live with your illness': The first metaphor emphasizes the struggle between the person and the disorder, whereas the second emphasizes the person's acceptance of their situation."

One of the project's main research conclusions is that this type of metaphor can have beneficial or harmful uses in public discourse and in the discourse of those affected and those who interact with them.

"Beneficial uses are those that convey empowerment, control or positive emotions; in other cases, they look to present a problem by separating the negative aspects from the situation as a whole," they explained.

Metaphors that serve these purposes are called "empowering metaphors" and are recommended for use "in public discourse and in relationships with people diagnosed with mental disorders." The researchers added that "their use should be encouraged by the people with these disorders themselves in order to avoid pejorative views of their situation."

A window into the feelings of people with mental disorders

The dictionary is organized both alphabetically and thematically into three broad areas: [metaphors of living with a mental disorder](#), [metaphors of communication and social context](#), and [metaphors of medicine and professional practice](#).

All the metaphors are grouped around different key concepts and come with several examples. As the researchers explained, by systematizing and exemplifying the metaphors used by these people, we can gain a deeper insight into what they "really think and experience." It is also a way for them to feel "more understood and less alone, realizing that their feelings and experiences are shared by more people."

The advantages of blogs and social media

One of the key features of the repository is that all the metaphors are taken from texts posted in Spanish on blogs or on X (formerly Twitter). These communication channels have an important advantage over other written media.

"The authors' words are not filtered by an external interviewer, but come from a genuine and spontaneous willingness to share a lived experience on social media. In addition, individuals can use the relative anonymity of the internet to reveal things they would not, for example, discuss in a face-to-face research setting. For this reason, the range of metaphors found is much wider than in [previous similar studies](#)."

This approach has been useful in collecting the many metaphors in the repository that criticize the [medical profession](#) or highlight the suffering caused by social stigma and discrimination, showing "how patients seek greater empathy and understanding of their suffering from both medical staff and the wider community." In this regard, the researchers stressed that the dictionary can be valuable in promoting "more respectful discourse" on mental health by public institutions and the press.

A tool for detecting psychopathology

Finally, the Mental Health Metaphor Dictionary can be used as a gateway to detecting psychopathology. "Knowing which conceptual metaphors are most commonly used to express mental distress could help families or people close to those affected to identify possible disorders," the researchers explained.

Likewise, although it cannot be used directly as a [diagnostic tool](#), it could be used to "identify which stage of the disorder the patient is in,

according to the type of metaphors used, or to analyze whether therapy has been successful."

A pioneering initiative

This collection of metaphors is the first of its kind. While there are a number of domain-independent repositories of conceptual metaphors based on English texts, there are very few domain-specific repositories in other languages.

In fact, in the review, they found only two repositories focused on specific subject areas: cognition and health. "Although these subject repositories are potentially the most useful for society, they are the rarest," they concluded.

More information: Marta Coll-Florit et al, Metaphor repositories: the case of the mental health metaphor dictionary, *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/lc/fqad058](https://doi.org/10.1093/lc/fqad058)

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