

# WORDS MATTER:

Rather Than ...	Consider ...	Rationale
<b>Firearms and firearm ownership</b>		
“Gun”	“Firearm”	“Firearm” may be more neutral
“Restriction,” “surrender,” or “confiscation” (unless as an outcome of enforcement activity)	“Transfer,” “relinquishment,” or “temporary removal”	Avoids provocative language; distinguishes between enforcement and voluntary actions
“Assault weapon,” “assault rifle,” or “military-style rifle”	“AR15-style rifle,” “AK-style rifle,” “semiautomatic rifle,” “Rifle”	Avoids terms that gun owners may perceive as pejorative or inaccurate
“Firearm safety counseling” to describe counseling about secure firearm storage	“Firearm responsibility,” “prevention of unauthorized access,” or “secure firearm storage” counseling	“Firearm safety” connotes safe firearm handling (e.g., how to safely use a firearm); focuses on access (vs storage) avoids linkage to storage-related laws
“Are your firearms locked up?”	“Do you prevent access of your firearms by unauthorized individuals” (e.g., untrained, unable to control firearms owing to strength/age, unable to understand risks, altered judgment or perception)	Shifts focus from the item to the at-risk user, drawing on standard principle of responsible firearm ownership (preventing unauthorized access)
“All guns should be stored unloaded and separate from ammunition”	Responsibly “stage” firearms intended for defensive purposes; responsibly “store” firearms used for hunting or recreation	Acknowledges that norms and preferences for staging or storage vary according to use (e.g., a personal defense weapon is often stored locked but loaded and quickly accessible)
<b>Suicide</b>		
“Commit” suicide	“Die by” or “die of” suicide	“Commit” implies criminality of the act and assigns blame
“Successful” or “failed” suicide attempt	“Died by suicide,” “completed suicide,” “killed themselves,” “survived an attempt”	Avoids assigning moral judgment to outcome of attempt or implying that suicide death is a good outcome
“X caused the suicide”; “it was out of the blue”	Acknowledge that suicide is complex with no single cause and that there are often warning signs	Avoids oversimplifying suicide and encourages awareness of warning signs
“Suicide is inevitable”; “they’ll always find a way”	Acknowledge that suicide can be prevented and that most people who survive a suicide attempt do not later die by suicide	Supports rationale for reducing access to firearms and other lethal methods during often brief (hours or days) periods or risk to prevent death
Omitting practical tips for seeking or providing help	Emphasize that asking people about suicide does not increase their risk; provide basic suicide warning signs and hotline resources	Supports efforts to make it easy to give and find help
<b>Community violence</b>		
“Gangs,” “thugs,” “gang bangers,” or “ex-convicts”	“Group involved,” “street affiliated,” “formerly incarcerated,” “justice involved,” or “people who use violence”	Avoids stigmatizing perpetrators or victims on the basis of prior/potential criminality; avoids implying that victims “deserved it”
“Black-on-Black crime”	Describe the high relative risk of firearm injury and death among young Black and Hispanic men and the structural racism that underlies that reality	Avoids implying that inherent racial/ethnic differences are the risk factor (rather than structural inequities in housing, jobs, education, and prison sentences)
“Inner cities” or “urban communities” as code words for race or socioeconomic status	Talk about “communities that are disproportionately affected by violence”	Avoids stigmatizing people living in urban communities affected by gun violence
Jokes or statements about victims such as “they were just minding their own business”; suggesting that victims are withholding information by not revealing who shot them	In clinical settings, say “I’m sorry this happened to you” and provide time and space for patients to discuss the circumstances if and when they are ready	Follows principles of “trauma-informed care” in not forcing people to discuss circumstances if they are not ready
Implying that mental illness is the cause of all violence	Acknowledge the complex relationship between mental health and community violence exposure; note that the vast majority of people with mental health conditions do not engage in violent behavior and that people with mental health conditions are at increased risk of being the victim of crime	Avoids misdirection of resources and attention from the real underlying problems (e.g., prior firearm injury increases risk of substance use, depression, and anxiety; people with serious mental illness are more likely to be victims than perpetrators)
“Innocent victims”	Acknowledge that all victims are equally deserving of medical care and prevention efforts	Avoids implying that some people “deserve” to get shot and therefore that violence cannot be prevented