

What is a Consumer?

When we use the word “consumer” in the behavioral health field, we are talking about any person who participates in any behavioral health service.

People often think that a behavioral health service must be some kind of treatment, such as talk therapy or medication management, but there are other kinds, too. Some behavioral health services are focused on helping people who are living with mental health or substance abuse challenges in other areas of their lives, such as obtaining housing, applying for disability benefits, or getting a job.

It is important to note that being a consumer is not defined by diagnosis. While it is true that most behavioral health consumers have been diagnosed with a mental health or substance use disorder at some point in their lives, others have not. And consumers come in all shapes, sizes, ages, colors, and backgrounds. If you are engaged in behavioral health services now, or have been in the past, the term “consumer” may apply to you.

What is The Difference between a Consumer and a “Client, Patient, or Participant”?

For the most part, these words all refer to the same group of people. Different words are sometimes used depending upon the setting you are in. “Consumer” is the one we like to use here at Region 6 because we feel it is both accurate and respectful of the people we serve. But these are all different ways to refer to people living with behavioral health challenges. The people we refer to today as consumers have been labeled with many other words throughout history. As cultural and professional attitudes have changed, so has the language used to describe this group. Today’s terms are strongly influenced by the opinions of consumers themselves, and are more intentionally focused on the role of the person rather than his or her challenges.

Ultimately, you have the right to identify yourself in a way that you are comfortable with. If “consumer” or any other term you hear does not feel right for you, that is okay. Do not be afraid to ask your providers, supporters, family, or anyone else to refer to you or your challenges using words that are respectful and meaningful to you.