



Recommended Language Guide for Communicating about Substance Use Disorders

What is stigmatizing language?

Stigma is a set of negative beliefs about something or someone. Stigmatizing language are words or phrases that associate negative values with people. They can also contain stereotypes or judgement.

Why is it important to avoid using stigmatizing language?

Language and words hold meaning, reflect values, and evolves with time. Using stigmatizing language to describe people with substance use disorders harms them directly. It does so by increasing isolation, reducing empathy, and creating barriers to care due to fear of judgement. Studies have shown that stigma is a big barrier to care. It stops people who use drugs from getting medical care and seeking substance use treatment.

In healthcare settings, use of stigmatizing language is linked to negative health outcomes. It is also medically inaccurate. Additionally, since the media influences public opinion, the use of stigmatizing language in the media can create and perpetuate negative public bias. It can also reduce support for evidence-based solutions and increase prejudice against others.

What is person-first language?

Person-first language was founded by self-advocacy groups in the Disability Rights movement. It is a way to shift focus back to the person, away from the illness or disease. Since then, it has expanded to include other chronic health conditions. For example, when someone is called "the diabetic" instead of "a person with diabetes", the former defines a person by their disease.

Similarly, instead of "the addict", the phrase "a person with substance use disorder" places the emphasis on the person. It humanizes the individual and can reduce negative bias and lessen moral judgement.

Additional examples:

Recommended Language when Communicating about People and Behavior	Stigmatizing Language to Avoid when Communicating about People
Drug use, substance use or substance use disorder	Drug abuse/ Drug habit / Drug problem / Substance abuse
Person with a substance use disorder, person who uses drugs	Drug addict / Junkie / Druggie / Alcoholic / Substance abuser
Not using substances / drugs, no longer using substances	Clean / Sober

Medically Accurate Language when Communicating about Treatment	Medically Inaccurate Language to Avoid when Communicating about Treatment
Positive/negative urine drug screen	Dirty/clean urine drug screen
Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)	Medication-assisted treatment, replacement therapy, substitution therapy
Withdrawal management	Detox
Residential treatment	Rehab

What if a person uses a stigmatizing term to describe themselves?

People with substance use disorders or those in recovery may differ in their preferences and values. For some, they may choose to use stigmatized terms as a way of reclaiming their identity. It is important to allow those who wish to self-identify to do so without contributing to negative public bias ourselves.

For more examples of preferred language substitutions, please refer to the following resources:

- American Society of Addiction Medicine [Hand out](#)
- [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) (NIDA)*
- Shatterproof [Resource Guide](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA)*
- AP Stylebook: [Updates](#)
- Columbia Journalism Review: [Every Journalist Should Know](#)

* Note: NIDA & SAMHSA are both in the process of updating their name, to reflect these principles.