



The Words We Use Matter

A General Guide to Reducing Stigma Around Substance Use

Website resource for WellLink Health Alliance

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****Disclaimer**

This guide is provided for general educational purposes. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, or emergency services.

What Is Stigma?

Stigma occurs when negative beliefs, stereotypes, or judgments are directed toward people because of a health condition, experience, identity, or circumstance.

People who use substances, have a substance use disorder, or are in recovery may experience stigma from individuals, organizations, healthcare systems, media, and the broader community. They may also internalize negative messages and experience shame or self-judgment.

Stigma can make it more difficult for someone to:

- Speak openly about their experiences.
- Ask questions or seek support.
- Access prevention, treatment, or recovery services.
- Remain engaged in care.
- Feel respected by providers, family members, and the community.

Why Language Matters

Words can shape how people understand substance use and how they respond to those who need support. Labels may reduce a person to a diagnosis, behavior, or period in their life.

Respectful language recognizes the whole person. It communicates that substance use disorders are treatable health conditions and that recovery is possible.

Changing language alone cannot eliminate stigma, but it is a practical step that individuals and organizations can take immediately.

Principles for Respectful Communication

Place the Person First

Person-first language describes the individual before describing a diagnosis or experience.

For example, use **“person with a substance use disorder”** instead of defining someone as an “addict.”

Describe Facts Without Assigning Judgment

Focus on observable information. Avoid words that suggest a person is morally wrong, difficult, irresponsible, or intentionally refusing to improve.

For example, documentation can explain that someone “was unable to attend three appointments” instead of simply describing that person as “noncompliant.”

Use Accurate Terms

“Substance use,” “substance misuse,” and “substance use disorder” do not mean exactly the same thing.

- **Substance use** is a general description and does not automatically indicate a health disorder.
- **Substance misuse** may describe substance use that creates risks or negative consequences.
- **Substance use disorder** is a diagnosable health condition.

Use the term that accurately reflects the situation.

Ask About Individual Preferences

People may use different words to describe themselves and their experiences. Some may identify with language connected to a recovery community, while others may prefer clinical or person-first terminology.

When appropriate, ask: ***“What language would you like us to use?”***

Respect Self-Identification

A person may use a term for themselves that professionals would not ordinarily use. Respect their self-identification without assuming that the same term should be applied to other people.

Examples of More Respectful Language

Avoid using	Consider using
<i>Addict or drug abuser</i>	Person with a substance use disorder
<i>Drug user</i>	Person who uses drugs
<i>Alcoholic</i>	Person with an alcohol use disorder
<i>Clean</i>	In recovery, abstinent, or not currently using substances
<i>Dirty drug screen</i>	Positive toxicology result
<i>Clean drug screen</i>	Negative toxicology result
<i>Failed a drug test</i>	Tested positive for a substance
<i>Noncompliant</i>	Was unable to complete, declined, or did not follow the recommended plan
<i>Former addict</i>	Person in recovery or person with a history of substance use disorder
<i>Addicted baby</i>	Infant with prenatal substance exposure
<i>Replacement therapy</i>	Medication treatment

Avoid using

Habit

Consider using

Substance use or substance use disorder, depending on the situation

Reducing Stigma in Everyday Settings

In Healthcare and Behavioral Health Services

- Welcome people without judgment.
- Explain confidentiality and available services clearly.
- Use objective language in records and referrals.
- Include the individual in decisions about care.
- Avoid making assumptions based on appearance, diagnosis, treatment history, or current substance use.

In Prevention and Community Education

- Provide accurate information without relying on fear or shame.
- Discuss both risk factors and protective factors.
- Emphasize practical ways to reduce harm and support health.
- Use images and stories that show people with dignity.
- Include messages of hope, support, treatment, and recovery.

In the Workplace

- Review policies and training materials for outdated terms.
- Avoid jokes, labels, and casual statements that reinforce stereotypes.
- Protect employee privacy.
- Share information about available support without singling out individuals.
- Treat substance use and mental health concerns with the same professionalism as other health matters.

In Families and Communities

- Listen without immediately criticizing or correcting.
- Express concern about a behavior without labeling the person.

- Avoid using shame as a motivation for change.
- Learn about treatment, harm reduction, and recovery resources.
- Remember that support and accountability can exist together.

Before You Speak or Write

Consider asking yourself:

1. Is this wording accurate?
2. Am I describing a person or placing a label on them?
3. Does the language communicate blame or judgment?
4. Would I use the same words if the person were present?
5. Does my message leave room for dignity, support, and recovery?

Learn More

From the Presenter:

- **University of Minnesota's Center for Practice Transformation: Clinical Tools Archive - Center for Practice Transformation (umn.edu)**

<https://practicetransformation.umn.edu/clinical-tools>

- **Well + Good: What is Cultural Humility**

<https://www.wellandgood.com/what-is-cultural-humility/>

- **National Consortium of Stigma and Empowerment: Resources**

<https://www.stigmaandempowerment.org/resources>

- **Harvard's Implicit Association Test**

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

- **Center for Disease Control: Reducing Stigma**

www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/stress-coping/reduce-stigma/index.html

Additional Resources:

- **National Institute on Drug Abuse**

Words Matter: Terms to Use and Avoid When Talking About Addiction

<https://nida.nih.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/health-professions-education/words-matter-terms-to-use-avoid-when-talking-about-addiction>

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

Stigma and Language: The Power of Perceptions and Understanding

<https://www.samhsa.gov/substance-use/treatment/stigma-language>

- **Recovery Research Institute**

Addictionary: A Substance Use and Recovery Glossary

<https://www.recoveryanswers.org/addiction-ary/>

- **Office of Addiction Services and Supports**

Person-First Language and Stigma Glossary

<https://oasas.ny.gov/stigma-glossary>

- **FindTreatment.gov**

Confidential information about mental health and substance use treatment services in the United States.

<https://findtreatment.gov/>

Immediate Support

The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** provides confidential support to people experiencing mental health, substance use, or emotional distress.

Call or text 988

<https://988lifeline.org/>

If someone is experiencing a medical emergency or an immediate risk of harm, call **911**.