

Language Guide



Certain language can be stigmatizing when discussing substance use. Stigma can put up metaphorical walls that keep people away from people and places that might feel unsafe. Feeling a sense of belonging within a community is essential for everyone to access the social connection and support necessary for wellness. Help support safe and non-stigmatizing communities.

Note that language evolves, and the list may change.

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| Recommended Language | Stigmatizing or Less-Preferred Language | Rationale Supported by Research |
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| For non-prescription drugs: Use For prescription drugs: Misuse Used other than prescribed | Abuse | The term ‘abuse’ was found to have a high association with negative judgment and punishment. The legitimate use of drugs is as prescribed by the person to whom they are prescribed. Consumption outside these parameters is misused. |
| Substance Use Disorder (SUD) | Drug Addiction, Drug Problem, Habit, Drug Habit, Dependence | Neutral, non-judgemental language. |
| Person who Uses Substances (PWUS) Person with a Substance Use Disorder (PWSUD) Person in Active Use | Addict, Junkie, Abuser, Druggie, User | Person-first language. Neutral, non-judgemental language. |
| Has a [X] Use Disorder | Addicted to [X] | Person-first language. Neutral non-judgemental language. |
| Person with Alcohol Use Disorder (PWAUD) | Alcoholic, Drunk | Person-first language. Neutral non-judgemental language. |
| For toxicology screen: Testing Negative For non-toxicology purposes: Being in Remission or Recovery Substance Free No longer using [X] Substance Abstinent from Drugs | Clean | Use clinically accurate stigmatizing terminology the same way it would be used for other medical conditions. Dirty/clean is associated with filth, not a medical condition. Invokes punitive bias and shame. |
| Adherent Non-Adherent | Compliant Non-Compliant | Neutral, non-judgemental language. |
| Withdrawal Management | Detox | Detox gives a connotation that a person needs to be cleansed from their substance use. |
| For toxicology screen: Testing Positive For non-toxicology purposes: Person who uses drugs | Dirty | Dirty/clean is associated with filth and is not a medical condition. Invokes punitive bias and shame. May decrease the patient’s sense of hope & self-efficacy for change. |
| Baby with Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Newborn Exposed to Substances | Drug addicted infant, Addicted baby, Born addicted | Person-first neutral language doesn’t put moral judgment on the mother and keeps the focus on clinical solutions. |

| Recommended Language | Stigmatizing or Less-Preferred Language | Rationale Supported by Research |
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| Use of [X] substance | Drug of choice or abuse | Neutral, non-judgemental language. |
| Person arrested for drug violation Person with criminal legal involvement | Drug Offender | Person-first language. Neutral, non-judgemental language. |
| Person in Recovery or Person in Long Term Recovery Person who previously used drugs | Ex-addict, Former addict, Reformed addict | Person-first language. Neutral non-judgemental language. |
| Unregulated Substances | Illicit Substances | Neutral non-judgemental language. |
| Medication as a Tool for Treatment | Medication as a crutch for recovery | Medications are treatment tools for other diseases; substance use disorder should not be treated differently. |
| Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) Pharmacotherapy Medication for SUD | Opioid replacement/substitution maintenance therapy, Medication assisted treatment | Treatments for other diseases are not labeled “medication-assisted treatment” so substance use disorder should not be treated differently. Replacement could imply that patients are trading one substance use disorder for another. |
| Accidental Drug Poisoning | Overdose | “Overdose” does not apply to all situations. Using overdose in the wrong context can suggest intentional overuse or careless use of the substance. Accidental drug poisoning suggests drugs were poisoned, contaminated, and/or unpredictable. |
| Toxic Drug Supply Crises | Overdose Crisis | Overdose crisis can suggest people are dying from intentionally overusing or carelessly using substances. |
| Resumed or Experienced a Recurrence of Substance Use or Substance Use Disorder symptoms | Relapse, Lapse, Slip | Neutral non-judgemental language. |
| Recovery Management | Relapse prevention | Neutral non-judgmental language. |
| In Recovery Person who is Abstinent | Sober | Person-first, neutral non-judgmental language. |
| Maintained Recovery | Stayed clean | Neutral non-judgmental language (see rationale for clean). |
| Person who is Using [X] Substance | Untreated addict | Person-first, neutral non-judgmental language. |
| Prescribed Alternatives | Safer Supply | Misleading, there is no guarantee of safety with any substance. |

Let Us Know What You Think

We welcome your feedback. Please let us know if you have questions, or updated information.
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Source Information

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