

Reducing Stigmatizing Language Surrounding Substance Use

The Problem

Stigma can be defined as negative beliefs that are held by a group or society surrounding another group of people.¹ For individuals who use substances, stigma can have a number of negative impacts, including:

- Feelings of shame or self-judgement, which can decrease motivation to seek help or guidance;
- Feelings of shame or judgement from others, including healthcare providers, which can prevent or limit access to treatment and help; and
- Ultimately, worsening of the disorder and of comorbid conditions from lack of treatment.

Stigma can also be reflected in social practice and institutional policies, and pose further barriers to care.

Talking About Substance Use: Language Choices

Stigma is perpetuated through negative language and stereotyping. Often, individuals who use substances are referred to as “addicts” or “junkies” and portrayed as dangerous, immoral, criminal, and responsible for their illness. It is important to remember that **substance use disorder is a legitimate illness with biochemical indicators** and **not** a moral failing on the part of the individual.

Changing the language we use when talking about substance use and recovery is one way to combat stigma towards individuals who use substances in the healthcare field and promote recovery. Below is a list of commonly used terms and replacements that avoid stigmatizing or stereotyping individuals who use substances.

Non-Stigmatizing Language Choices for Talking About Substance Use²

Don't Say...	Instead Say...	Reason
Addict, Druggie, Junkie	Person with Substance Use Disorder	Puts the person first and removes stigmatizing language.
Substance abuse	Substance misuse	Removes negative implications associated with the word “abuse.”
Drug of abuse	Drug of misuse	Removes negative implications associated with the word “abuse.”
“Clean” or “Dirty” (when discussing urine screen results)	Positive or Negative screen for [substance]	Removes negative implications associated with the word “dirty.”
Denial	Ambivalence	Removes negative language.
Clean/Sober	Drug Free	Removes stigmatizing language and promotes recovery.
Relapse Prevention	Recovery Management	Promotes recovery.
Manipulative	Has unmet needs	Removes negative language.
Resistant to Treatment	Choosing not to	Removes negative language.

References

- 1 American Addiction Centers, Inc. (2018). “Shaming the Sick: Addiction and Stigma”<https://drugabuse.com/library/addiction-stigma/>
- 2 The Most Respectful Way of Referring to People is as People / Language of Recovery. In: Phoenix Center, ed.: Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network- Southeast, 2015.

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