

Communications and Working with the Media



A New Story About Substance Use, Solutions, and Prevention

Media and other communications agencies play a role in preventing substance misuse and reducing stigma in our state. Media can work with communities to change the conversation around substance use disorders and to promote health and wellness. Substance use prevention needs a story about solutions, not just problems.

Quick Tips:

- Accurately report events and information, and provide statistics and facts in a neutral, non-judgmental tone.
- Replace fear and shame-based language, visuals, and communications with positive, hope-based, healthy messages.
- Address misperceptions about peers' behaviors (particularly among youth). Youth are influenced by what they think their peers are doing. However, in many cases, data will show that most youth do not misuse drugs or alcohol.
- While we are greatly concerned about the usage and overdose statistics in West Virginia, we can also share stories of hope, solutions, and healthy behaviors.
- Accurate, balanced reporting is critical - exaggerating usage statistics can influence what youth (and adults) perceive as normal or typical behavior.

Challenge: Individualism & Stigma

Due to historical media and political coverage of substance use, the public overwhelmingly views substance use as a matter of individual choice. This misunderstanding makes it difficult to direct the public to think about effective interventions and leads to the harmful idea that substance use and substance use disorder are moral failures - only to be prevented through individual willpower.

Solutions: Stigmatizing language can reinforce hurtful, dehumanizing stereotypes about people who use substances. Learn more about stigma below and review our guidance to stigma free reporting on page 19.

What is Stigma and Why Does It Matter?

Stigma exists as the negative attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and systems held by a group of people based on an attribute, condition, or behavior. Stigma can take many forms, from self-stigma that results in shame and isolation to structural stigma that results in policies which limit opportunities for people with a substance use disorder. Stigma is:

- “A strong feeling of disapproval that most people in society have about something”²⁵;
- “A mark of disgrace or dishonor associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person”²⁶
- A social process created by groups of people (often those in power) towards others;²⁷ and
- A deeply negative mindset that has no value to society.

There are many negative consequences associated with stigma. Stigma shows up in prejudicial attitudes about people with certain conditions and can lead to discriminatory practices against people with certain conditions.²⁸ Stigma decreases quality of life, and negatively impacts a person's sense of hope, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.²⁹

To learn more, visit www.stigmafreewv.org which includes resources, online training, and stories of recovery.

Challenge: Hopelessness

Stories of “epidemics” and “crisis” are all too common in media related to substance use. While the original goal may be to raise awareness about substance use, these stories rarely include messaging about solutions and what is being done in response. With the scope of the issue so large and no solutions being offered, it is only natural that people feel hopelessness and despair. It is challenging to build public support for solutions when the issue seems too large to solve.

Solutions:

- Shift focus of stories from individuals to structures, so that people can see exactly where changes need to be made. (Example: story on barriers and solutions to accessing treatment instead of a story on how an individual’s use of substances negatively impacted their family/community.)
- Always include concrete solutions and resources to help your audience see that change is possible.
- Show that solutions are the same size, scale, or scope as the problem.
- Dedicate at least as much “communications real estate” to solutions as you do problems.

Images

When selecting images to accompany reporting and messaging - refrain from sensational click-bait style images as they can be counter-productive and can undermine prevention messages. Use images that reflect the audience you are trying to reach and the behavior you are trying to promote.

USE: Visuals that convey hope and possibility

- Inspiring images with either a **subtle or bright color** scheme.
- Images that **reflect the audience** you are trying to reach & behavior you wish to promote.
- Individuals interacting with each other and their surroundings in **positive, meaningful ways**.



AVOID: Sensationalist images that highlight substance use and despair

- Individuals using substances such as alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs or misusing prescription medications.
- Very bold or dark color schemes.
- Showing youth engaging in behaviors that we are attempting to prevent.



Source:

Frameworks Institute - WV Prevention Brief

Frameworks Resources:

Reframing Adolescence and Adolescent Development: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkit/the-core-story-of-adolescence/>

Reframing Adolescent Substance Use and its Prevention: A Communications Playbook:

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/reframing-adolescent-substance-use-and-its-prevention-a-communications-playbook/>

Help and Hope WV Frameworks Webinar Series: <https://helpandhopewv.org/frameworks/>

Language

Correctly talking about substance use means omitting sensationalism for more accurate narratives, avoiding stigmatizing language, and acknowledging evidence-based solutions. Framing substance use/misuse as abuse associates it with criminal behaviors. Reference the language guidance chart and recommendations below to ensure you are providing stigma free reporting. Following are tips for how to talk, write, and report on substance use disorder:²⁴

- **Use Comparable Medical Terminology Whenever Possible.** Talk about substance use disorders and treatment in the same way you would other chronic medical conditions such as diabetes or cancer.
- **Use Person-First Language.** Put the person first, and the condition second – “a person with substance use disorder.”
- **Share the Solutions that Exist.** Many patients fully recover and go on to lead productive lives.
- **Provide Details of Those Solutions.** Share detailed accounts of how people are responding to effective evidence-based solutions.
- **Humanize the Condition.** Use language that humanizes and personalizes the condition, avoiding fear and blame tactics.
- **Use Reliable Sources.** Identify potential biases in source materials and provide a variety of voices.
- **Communicate Information About the Many Different Pathways to Recovery.** Everyone’s recovery may look different – there are many pathways to remission.
- **Share the Long-Term View.** Substance use disorder is a chronic disease and it can take years to recover.
- **Be Respectful.** Many families have experienced the loss of loved ones to substance use disorder. Be respectful in tone.

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/addiction-recovery-101/201801/communicating-about-addiction-accuracy-or-alienation>

Media Language Guidance	
Say this...	Instead of this...
Person with a substance use disorder, person with addiction, person who uses drugs/substances	Addict, junkie, crackhead, user, abuser, pill-popper, alcoholic
Substance use	Misuse or abuse
Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), treatment, opioid agonist therapy	Replacement therapy, substitution drugs
Negative or positive urine toxicology test	Dirty or clean urine
Individual in recovery, in remission	Recovering addict, clean
Infant with neonatal abstinence syndrome or substance exposed newborn	Addicted baby, drug baby

Media Resources



The National Institute on Drug Abuse Media Guide: How To Find What You Need to Know About Drug Use and Addiction

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/media-guide/science-drug-use-addiction-basics>



Changing The Narrative is a network of reporters, researchers, academics, and advocates providing accurate, humane, and scientifically-grounded information pertaining to substance use and addiction. <https://www.changingthenarrative.news/>



Frameworks Institute: Reframing Adolescent Substance Use and Its Prevention, a step-by-step guide to using evidence-based framing strategies to communicate about adolescent substance use.

http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/adolescence_youth/reframing_adolescent_substance_use_playbook_2018.pdf



The Associated Press Stylebook now includes a new entry on addictions and revised drug-related entries, including guidance to avoid words like abuse, problem, addict and abuser in most uses. https://www.apstylebook.com/ap_stylebook

Sources:

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McAlaney, J., Bewick, B. M., and Bauerle, J. (2010) *Social Norms Guidebook: A Guide to Implementing the Social Norms Approach in the UK*. University of Bradford, University of Leeds, Department of Health: West Yorkshire, UK.

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