

Words Matter: Preferred Language for Talking About Addiction

Addiction is a chronic but treatable medical condition - people can recover and continue to lead healthy lives. Often unintentionally, many people still talk about addiction in ways that are stigmatizing—meaning they use words that can portray someone with a substance use disorder (SUD) in a shameful or negative way and may prevent them from seeking treatment. With simple changes in language harmful stigma and negativity around SUD can be reduced or avoided. Use person-first language, which focuses on the person—not their illness.

See the table below for some helpful tips to choose words to reduce stigma and use person-first language when talking about addiction.

Talking About Yourself or Others with Substance Use Disorder		
Use	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Person with a substance use disorder Person with an opioid use disorder (OUD) or person with opioid addiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addict User Substance or drug abuser Junkie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using person-first language shows that SUD is an illness. Using these words shows that a person with a SUD “has” a problem/illness, rather than “is” the problem. The terms avoid elicit negative associations, punitive attitudes, and individual blame.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Person with alcohol use disorder Person who misuses alcohol/engages in unhealthy/hazardous alcohol use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alcoholic Drunk 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Person in recovery or long-term recovery/person who previously used drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Former addict Reformed addict 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Testing positive (on a drug screen) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dirty Failing a drug test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use medically accurate terminology the same way it would be used for other medical conditions. These terms may decrease a person’s sense of hope and self-efficacy for change.
Talking about Using Substances		
Use	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Substance use disorder Drug addiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Habit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Habit” implies that a person is choosing to use substances or can choose to stop. This implication is inaccurate. Describing SUD as a habit makes the illness seem less serious than it is.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use (for illicit drugs) Misuse (for prescription medications used other than prescribed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The term “abuse” was found to have a high association with negative judgments and punishment. Use outside of the parameters of how medications were prescribed is misuse.

Talking about Recovery and Treatment		
Use	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medication treatment for OUD • Medications for OUD • Opioid agonist therapy • Pharmacotherapy • Medication for a substance use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opioid substitution • Replacement therapy • Medication-assisted treatment (MAT) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a misconception that medications merely “substitute” one drug or “one addiction” for another. 5 • The term MAT implies that medication should have a supplemental or temporary role in treatment. Using “MOUD” aligns with the way other psychiatric medications are understood (e.g., antidepressants, antipsychotics), as critical tools that are central to a patient’s treatment plan.
Talking about Recovery and Treatment		
Use	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being in remission or recovery • Abstinent from drugs • Not drinking or taking drugs • Testing negative (on a drug screen) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of medical terminology (the same way you would for other illnesses) can help reduce stigma.
Talking about Babies Born to Parents Who Used Drugs		
Use	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baby born to a parent who used drugs while pregnant • Baby with signs of withdrawal from prenatal drug exposure • Newborn exposed to substances • Baby with neonatal abstinence syndrome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addicted baby 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies cannot be born with addiction because addiction is a behavioral disorder. • Using person-first language can reduce stigma. • Use of medical terminology (the same way you would for other illnesses) can help reduce stigma.

Adapted from: <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/addiction-science/words-matter-preferred-language-talking-about-addiction>