

LANGUAGE & STIGMA

Stigma creates barriers to treatment and recovery for individuals with substance use disorders. The language we use can cause or potentially perpetuate stigma. Below are examples of some of the potentially stigmatizing words that might be used and examples of different terminology that can be used instead.

WORDS TO AVOID

Addict, Alcoholic, Junkie, Abuser

Problem with the terms: It can be demeaning because the person is labeled by their illness and can imply a permanency to their condition, leaving no room for a change in their condition.

Clean (When referring to recovery)

Problem with the term: It implies that when the person was in active addiction, they were dirty, unclean and unwanted (stigmatizing, pushing away)

Clean/Dirty (When referring to urine screen)

Problem with the terms: Treats the urine of a person with a SUD differently than a person with any other medical condition.

Drug Overdose

Problem with the terms: Implies that the individual caused the condition.

Relapse

Problem with the term: Can imply a moral failing as the origin of the word states that there is a return to heresy or wrongdoing.

ALTERNATIVE/PREFERRED

Person with a Substance Use Disorder.

First person language is the accepted standard for discussing people with disabilities and/or chronic medical conditions.

In remission (partial-sustained)

Remission is a medical term that describes a period of time in which signs and symptoms of the illness have disappeared and that addiction is indeed a medical condition

Positive/negative for (substance)

Treats the urine of the individual with a SUD in the same way that they would any other chronic illness.

Drug Poisoning

According to the CDC report, 86% of drug poisoning deaths were unintentional. Approximately 8% were suicides, while there is no precise determination of the real intent in 6% of cases.

Recurrence/Return to Use

The terms tend to be less moralizing and carry greater hope.