

Addiction Stigma and Language



Why are we talking about this today?

- How do language and substance use / addiction intersect?
- What words, terms, ideas that we use around substance use / addiction can be harmful?
- What can we do to reduce it?

Words Matter



Addiction Language Guide

Recommended language (based on consensus, research, and/or expert opinion)	Stigmatizing language	Rationale & related research (if applicable)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Substance use disorder, addiction (if clinically accurate) 2. Use (for illicit substances); misuse, used other than prescribed (for prescription medications) 3. Harmful, hazardous, problematic, or risky use 	Abuse, Drug problem, Habit/ Drug habit, Dependence	Neutral, non-judgmental language
Person with a substance use disorder ("person with opioid/alcohol use disorder" if relevant, "patient" if in a clinical setting)	Abuser, Addict, Druggie, User, Junkie	Neutral, non-judgmental language. Several studies compare "abuser/abuse" to "person with substance use disorder" and confirm that person-first language is less stigmatizing

Addiction Language Guide

Person who tests positive for substance use	Dirty	Dirty/clean is associated with filth and not a medical condition. Invokes punitive bias and shame.
Has a [X] use disorder	Addicted to [X]	Neutral, non-judgmental language. Several studies compare "abuser/abuse" to "person with substance use disorder" and confirm that person-first language is less stigmatizing
Person with alcohol use disorder; related: harmful or hazardous alcohol use	Alcoholic, Drunk	Neutral, non-judgmental language. Several studies compare "abuser/abuse" to "person with substance use disorder" and confirm that person-first language is less stigmatizing
Substance-free; related: no longer using [X substance]	Clean	Dirty/clean is associated with filth, not a medical condition. Invokes punitive bias and shame.
Use of [X substance]	Drug of choice or abuse	Neutral, non-judgmental language

Addiction Language Guide

Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD), medication for Alcohol Use Disorder	Opioid replacement/ substitution/ maintenance therapy, medication assisted treatment	Treatments for other diseases are not labelled “medication assisted treatment,” so substance use disorder should not be treated differently. “Replacement” suggests that patients are trading one substance use disorder for another
Resumed or experienced a recurrence of substance use or substance use disorder symptoms	Relapse, lapse, slip	Neutral, non-judgmental language
Recovery management	Relapse prevention	Neutral, non-judgmental language
Well, healthy, in recovery	Sober	Neutral, non-judgmental language
Maintained recovery	Stayed clean	Neutral, non-judgmental language (see rationale for “clean”)

PERSON with the Substance Use Disorder may say:

Addict
Drug Abuser
Alcoholic
Dirty/Clean



GENERAL PUBLIC, HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS MUST say:

Person with a Substance Use Disorder
Recovery
Misuse
Problem substance abuse
Negative/Positive test



Stigma

How does this address the urgency of the addiction & overdose crises?

Public Stigma

Society's negative attitudes toward a group of people creating an environment where individuals feel unwelcomed, judged, and/or blamed

Structural Stigma

Systems-level discrimination caused by institutional policies and/or dominant cultural norms

Self-Stigma

Where individuals accept societal stereotypes and experience reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy

Key Drivers of the Epidemic

- Shame and social isolation
- Individuals not seeking help for their addiction
- Insufficient treatment capacity
- Health care coverage and reimbursement disparities
- Non-evidence-based treatment
- Criminalization of people with SUD
- Social and structural barriers to recovery

Seven of the nine key drivers of the epidemic are driven by pervasive stigma

What Can We Do?

- Adjust your language
- Learn the facts
- Speak out when you hear something stigmatizing; challenge misconceptions and stereotypes
- Speak with dignity and respect when discussing substance use
- Support your family, friends, and community – see the whole person
- Listen to people when they're sharing their story

Milwaukee County Substance Abuse Coalition



MILWAUKEE COUNTY SUBSTANCE
ABUSE PREVENTION COALITION

Brainstorming Session

- Milwaukee County Substance Use and Addiction Coalition
 - Pros: similar acronym, good for brand awareness
 - Does it represent what we want?
- Others?

Thank you!