



WORDS MATTER: ADDRESSING STIGMA THROUGH LEXICON

What Is Stigma?

Stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person.¹ Four types of stigmas are public stigma, self-stigma, structural stigma and stigma against medication for opioid use disorder. Stigma limits the ability of providers to offer help, and results in discrimination and exclusion of people seeking treatment. Stigma is a key stimulus behind most drivers of the growing opioid epidemic.²

Frequently, people with substance use disorder (SUD) face criticism, contempt and rejection from colleagues, medical staff, strangers and even family and friends.

The stigma surrounding substance misuse compounds the person's own struggles with guilt, self-loathing and drug-induced alterations to their cognitive functions. Stigma discourages individuals from seeking treatment for a medical condition that others may view as a moral failing, dismissing the genetic and environmental factors contributing to addiction.

A study shows 49% of news stories about the opioid epidemic mentioned at least one stigmatizing term for individuals with SUD. Meanwhile, less than 5% of these news stories mentioned expanding treatment for SUD.³

Addressing that gap starts with changing the language around opioid and other substance use disorders from negative, accusatory words to nonjudgmental, neutral words and medical terms. This lexicon has been created to help encourage that language shift so society begins to humanize people with a substance use disorder, reminding them they are worthy of compassion and care.



¹ Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. Stigma noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford advanced American dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com. Oxford Learner's Dictionaries | Find definitions, translations, and grammar explanations at Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/stigma#:~:text=stigma-,noun,stigma%20attached%20to%20being%20divorced

² A-Movement-to-End-Addiction-Stigma.pdf (shatterproof.org), p.4, executive summary.

³ McGinty, E.E., Stone, E.M., Kennedy-Hendricks, A., Barry, C.L. (2019). Stigmatizing language in news media coverage of the opioid epidemic: Implications for public health. McGinty, E.E., Stone, E.M., Kennedy-Hendricks, A., Barry, C.L. Preventative Medicine, 124, 110-114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jypmed.2019.03.018>



LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES

Addiction & People With SUD

Terminology about addiction impacts the perception for everyone involved, spanning from media outlets to family and friends. Here are recommended neutral replacements that put the person first.

SAY THIS: Person (or patient, when in clinical care) who has a substance use disorder (SUD)/opioid use disorder (OUD), or a person who is using

NOT THIS: Addict, untreated addict, user, abuser, druggie, junkie or dooper

SAY THIS: Person with alcohol use disorder or harmful alcohol use

NOT THIS: Alcoholic, alcohol-dependent, drunk, stoner

SAY THIS: Substance use disorder, addiction (if clinically correct)

NOT THIS: Drug habit, drug problem or drug dependence

SAY THIS: Harmful, hazardous or risky use, or misuse (with prescription drugs)

NOT THIS: Drug abuse

SAY THIS: Use of substance X

NOT THIS: Drug of choice, drug of abuse





LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES

Withdrawal, Recovery & Abstinence

For people with SUD, the term “detox” can trigger fear of a painful overwhelming commitment, rather than opportunity for recovery. Afterwards, the person’s progress should be emphasized, not their past.

SAY THIS: Withdrawal management

NOT THIS: Detox

SAY THIS: Person in recovery or long-term recovery

NOT THIS: Ex-addict, former addict, reformed addict

SAY THIS: Person no longer using or substance-free (if the person is NOT in a recovery program or treatment)

NOT THIS: Sober, staying clean, dry drunk





LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES

Addiction Testing & Maintenance of Recovery

Frequent use of the word “clean,” even among those who have substance use disorder, imposes a negative connotation that may lead individuals to believe a certain level of abstinence must be achieved to be considered clean.

SAY THIS: Tested negative for substance use (or specify the substance)

NOT THIS: Clean

SAY THIS: Adherent, substance-free or no longer using

NOT THIS: Clean or compliant

SAY THIS: Maintained recovery

NOT THIS: Stayed clean

SAY THIS: Is well or in recovery from SUD (specify the substance if person is not abstinent from alcohol/all harmful substances)

NOT THIS: Sober, clean





LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES

Resumption of Substance Use

The journey from addiction to recovery may include deviations from the treatment path in progress. During this period, resumed substance use may occur for an unknown period. Negative terms describing this can increase feelings of failure and hopelessness.

SAY THIS: Resumed substance use or experienced a recurrence of SUD

NOT THIS: Relapsed, lapsed, slipped or is a chronic relapser

SAY THIS: Nonadherent

NOT THIS: Noncompliant

SAY THIS: Recovery management

NOT THIS: Relapse prevention





LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES

Language For Medical Professionals/ Treatment

Medical staff members may unintentionally use disparaging language about patients' conditions amongst fellow colleagues and to the patient. To avoid damaging patient trust in health care providers and the treatment they provide, appropriate language should be considered.

SAY THIS: Person who tests positive for substance use

NOT THIS: Addict, dirty (patient)

SAY THIS: Patient with an injury or pain needing treatment (after thorough assessment of patient)

NOT THIS: Drug seeker

SAY THIS: Baby with neonatal opioid withdrawal/neonatal abstinence syndrome

NOT THIS: Addicted baby, drug-addicted infant

SAY THIS: Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), medication for alcohol use disorder

NOT THIS: Opioid replacement/substitution/maintenance therapy or medication-assisted treatment

SAY THIS: Medication as a tool for treatment, generally referring to buprenorphine or methadone

NOT THIS: Medication as a crutch for recovery, substituting one (addictive) drug for another, replacing one addiction with another





LANGUAGE BEST PRACTICES

Language For Criminal Justice Professionals

Use of neutral language can reduce bias, stigma and perpetuation of stereotypes within prisons and other criminal justice settings.

SAY THIS: Person who reports using opioids, alcohol or stimulants, or person with a substance use disorder

NOT THIS: Drug or substance user, dope addict, drug addict, alcoholic

SAY THIS: Person or individual who screened negative or positive (who might be at risk of withdrawal or suicide)

NOT THIS: Inmate with a clean or dirty screen

SAY THIS: Person or individual detained in jail, or formerly incarcerated

NOT THIS: Inmate, criminal, offender or felon

