

Humanizing Language to Reduce Stigma

Substance Use

Stigma means that people have negative ideas about something, like stereotypes. Stigma can hurt people. When it comes to substance use disorder, stigma creates a lot of problems for people's well-being. The words we use can shape how the world sees and treats people, so it's important to be careful with the things we say. Everyone can make a difference in someone else's life.

Remember, language changes, and it's important to listen to how people want to be identified. We should respect their preferences and use the words that they feel comfortable with, even if it's different than what is in this guide.

Instead of...	Use...	Why it matters
Abuse	Use, use other than prescribed	The word <i>abuse</i> has negative meanings that can make people blame.
Addict, junkie, alcoholic, drunk, druggie	Person with substance use disorder or person in active use	Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.
Addicted baby	Neonatal abstinence syndrome	SUD is a condition that affects behavior, and babies can't be born with it.
Alcoholism	Alcohol overuse	Since SUD is a medical condition, use words that are correct in a medical context.
Bum, transient	Person experiencing homelessness	Words like <i>bum</i> or <i>transient</i> take away a person's humanity; using person first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.
Clean (not using), sober	In remission or recovery, abstinent, not in active use	Use words that are neutral and fair without making judgements.
Clean or dirty, pass or fail (for urine toxicology)	Negative or positive	Use words that are neutral and fair without making judgements.
Detox	Withdrawal management	Since SUD is a medical condition, use words that are correct in a medical context.
Drug of choice (DOC)	Primary substance, use of (x) substance	DOC can make it seem like SUD is a choice.
Felon, criminal, justice	Person with legal involvement	Words like <i>felon</i> and <i>criminal</i> take away a person's humanity. <i>Justice</i> is subjective. Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.
Former addict, reformed addict	Person in recovery or person who previously used substances	Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.

Instead of...	Use...	Why it matters
Habit	Substance use disorder	<i>Habit</i> doesn't show how serious the disorder is and makes it seem like a choice.
Homeless	Unhoused or unsheltered	<i>Home</i> can mean different things to different people. It's better to use language that includes everyone's experiences.
Non-compliant	Unable to engage in activity, as discussed	<i>Non-compliant</i> can make it seem like the person doesn't have a choice in their treatment.
Opioid substitution, replacement therapy, Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT)	Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), medication for substance use disorder, SUD care	The stigmatized language makes it seem like medication is just replacing the substance or is a temporary part of treatment.
Prescriber	Provider	<i>Prescriber</i> might make it seem like the provider will only give medication.
Problem/issue	Circumstance, experience	<i>Problem</i> and <i>issue</i> can sound negative and make people feel blamed.
Refused	Declined	<i>Refused</i> can make it seem like someone is being defiant and doesn't have a choice in their treatment.
Relapse Prevention	Recovery management	<i>Relapse prevention</i> might make it sound like going back to substance use is inevitable.
Relapse/lapse/slip	Return to use, return of SUD symptoms	Use words that are neutral and fair without making judgements.
User, drug abuser	Person who uses substances	Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.

Humanizing Language to Reduce Stigma

Mental Health

Instead of...	Use...	Why it matters
Mentally ill	Person with a mental health condition or use the diagnosis the person prefers	Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.
Crazy, insane, disturbed	Person experiencing mental health symptoms or trauma, or person experiencing a mental health crisis	Some words make mental health conditions seem more extreme or dangerous than they really are and can make people feel ashamed or misunderstood.
Schizo, OCD, depressed	Person with a mental health condition, or person experiencing depression, OCD, schizo-effective disorder	Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.
Went psycho	Experienced a mental health crisis	Some words make mental health conditions seem more extreme or dangerous than they really are and can make people feel ashamed or misunderstood.
Psychotic	Person experiencing psychosis	Using person-first language recognizes that a person's situation doesn't define who they are.
Mental institution, nut house	Mental or behavioral health hospital	Using slang about treatment can imply judgment and make people less likely to ask for help.
Happy pills	Medication	Using slang about treatment can imply judgment and make people less likely to ask for help.
Shrink	Therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists	Using slang about treatment can imply judgment and make people less likely to ask for help.
Bipolar weather, OCD cleaning, my schizo [aunt], quit gaslighting	Reword any sentence that uses psychiatric terminology incorrectly or out of context	Using terms incorrectly can lead to confusion and make mental health issues seem less serious than they really are.
Committed suicide	Died by suicide	Commit implies criminality or sin.
Unsuccessful, failed attempt	Survived a suicide attempt	Shift language away from judgment or failure, and instead focuses on the person's survival.