

Language Matters: Do's and Don'ts for Language Used in Addiction Services

Our choice of language impacts the quality of care we provide. We must actively work to address and limit the use of stigmatizing language when discussing addiction. Stigma creates barriers to care and ultimately leading to poorer outcomes. For example, parents or expecting parents with substance use disorders may fear judgement and possible consequences as a result of their disorder (i.e. criminal charges or removal of children) that deters them from needed health care service such as prenatal care, SUD treatment, and preventative services. Below are recommendations on language to steer away from and alternative language that creates a nonjudgmental space for our community.

<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Alternative Language</i>	<i>Reason</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addict • Alcoholic • Abuser • User • Junkie • Former/Reformed Addict/ alcoholic 	<p>These terms label a person by their illness and are demeaning. These labels imply a permanency to the condition and do not allow space for change.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with a substance use disorder • Person with alcohol use disorder • Person in active addiction • Person experiencing an alcohol/drug related problem • Patient/Client • Person in Recovery • Person in Long-Term Recovery 	<p>These modifiers give identity to individuals as people rather than labeling them by their illness.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abuse • Misuse 	<p>Although “abuse” was a clinical term in the DSM-IV, it is no longer and is understood to be stigmatizing because: it negates the fact that addictive disorders are a medical condition; it blames the illness solely on the individual with the illness (ignoring environmental and genetic factors); it absolves those selling and promoting addictive substances of any wrong doing.</p> <p>Although “misuse” has been used to transition away from the use of abuse, some argue that technically speaking one does not misuse a substance when it is used as intended (ex: marijuana is purchased with the intention of being smoked, or prescription pain pills are taken as doctor orders). Misuse is subjective language.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmful Use 	<p>Objectively defines harmful consequences of substance use in regard to medical, psychological, and social wellbeing.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean • Dirty 	<p>These terms are stigmatizing because they associate illness symptoms with filth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstinent • Actively Using • Testing negative/positive for substances • Substance Free 	<p>Using medical and technical terminology is more appropriate language.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug Problem • Drug Habit 	<p>Calling addictive disorders a habit deny the medical nature of the condition and implies that resolution of the problem is simply a matter of willpower and ability to stop habitual behavior.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance Use Disorder • Alcohol or Drug Disorder • Active Addiction Disorder 	<p>By incorporating disorder or diseases, this language reinforces the medical nature of the condition.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement Therapy • Substitution Therapy • Opioid Replacement • Methadone Maintenance 	<p>This implies that treatment medications such as buprenorphine are equal to street drugs like heroin. The term suggests a lateral move from illegal addiction to legal addiction and does not reflect the true nature of treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medication- Assisted Treatment 	<p>This is accurate and nonstigmatizing term to describe addiction treatment with medically monitored pharmacological medications such as methadone, naltrexone, buprenorphine, and other medications.</p>

*The Words We Use Matter: Reducing Stigma through Language. The National Alliance of Advocates for Buprenorphine Treatment. Naabt.org

*Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma. SAMHSA'S Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. www.smhsa.gov/capt/