

The Language of Recovery

Stand Up to Stigma, Blame and Shame

Refer to people as people

Language is a powerful tool. It can inform, clarify, encourage, support, enlighten and unify. But it can also judge, show bias, divide and discourage.

When it comes to recovery, the language we use frames what those in recovery, or who are seeking recovery, think about themselves and their ability to change. That's why it's important to stop using harmful terms and start using person-first language that helps reduce stigma and negative bias.

For example, referring to people who have a substance use disorder as "addicts" or "abusers" misstates the nature of their condition. It encourages social rejection and incorrectly implies that those with active substance use disorders readily choose to engage in negative behavior, when they are actually experiencing a debilitating disease.

| Instead of | Use |
|--|---|
| Addict / Alcoholic | Person with a substance use disorder |
| Clean / Dirty (when referring to drug test results) | Positive / Negative / Inconsistent results |
| Clean / Sober (when referring to a person) | Drug free / Substance free |
| Client (when referring to a person receiving treatment services) | Patient |
| Drug of choice / Drug of abuse | Drug of use |
| Habit / Drug habit / Bad habit | Substance use disorder / Alcohol and drug disorder / Active addiction |
| Relapse | Recurrence / Return to use |
| Relapse is part of recovery | Recurrence / return to use may occur as part of the disease |
| Relapse prevention | Recovery management |
| Replacement therapy / Substitution therapy | Treatment / Medication-assisted treatment / Medication-assisted recovery |
| Self-help group | Mutual aid group |
| Substance abuse | Substance use disorder / Substance misuse |
| Treatment is the goal / Treatment is the only way into recovery | Treatment is an opportunity for initiation into recovery / Treatment is one of multiple pathways into recovery |
| User | Person who misuses alcohol or drugs / Person engaged in risky use of substances |

Learn more about recovery and reducing the stigma at

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