

Stigma Buster

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are among the most stigmatized conditions in the world.¹ Two main factors affect the burden of stigma placed on a particular disease or disorder: perceived control that a person has over the condition, and perceived fault in acquiring the condition. Many people mistakenly believe that mental health conditions (including substance misuse disorders) are both within their control, and partially their fault. For these reasons, they frequently attach more stigmas to them.² The potential for stigma is greater still when someone is using an illegal substance, which carries the additional perception of criminality.

Negative language turns people who use drugs into a stigmatized stereotype. This type of language is discriminatory, patronizing, and challenges public understanding of people who use drugs and the issues they face (whether they are in long-term recovery, or actively using). Addiction is a disease. It's important that we use language that frames it as a health issue and shows respect to people with an addiction and to their families who are impacted.³ Those who are battling addiction are not one-dimensional fictional characters -- they are supremely real human beings who are suffering every single day.⁴

Dated Language Instead of ...	Use Preferred Language	Rationale
Alcoholic/Addict/Junkie	Person/Person not yet in recovery; or a person with an alcohol/drug disorder	It is not right to define the person by the disease or by the drug.
Clean	Free from illicit and non-prescribed medications	"Free from illicit and non-prescribed medications" is a description of a person's current substance use status, as opposed to a values-laden term.
Clean drug screen	Negative drug screen	Clear description of test results, versus a values-laden term.
Dirty drug screen	Positive drug screen	Clear description of test results, versus a values-laden term.
Drug abuser	A person with a substance use disorder	Drug abuser implies the person <i>is</i> the problem, rather than as a person with a substance use disorder.
Drug-addicted babies/opioid babies	Babies experiencing neonatal opioid withdrawal (NOW) or neonatal	Babies can be born "dependent" on a substance used by their mother but cannot be born "addicted." Addiction requires meeting a number of criteria such as the

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	abstinence syndrome (NAS)	inability to control or reduce use; continue use despite adverse consequences, and more.
Drug habit	Substance use disorder	“Drug habit” inaccurately implies that a person is choosing to use substances or can choose to stop.
Drug of “choice”	Drug(s) of use/drug(s) used	Ignores the genetic, environmental, and coercion aspects of addiction as well as the brain science
IVDUs (injection drug users)	A person who injects substances	Injection drug abuser/IVDU implies the person <i>is</i> the problem, rather than as a person who injects substances.
“Replacement” or “substitution” when discussing opioid treatment medications	Medication-assisted treatment (MAT)	“Replacement” or “substitution” imply that medications merely “substitute” one drug or “one addiction” for another.

References/Resources

References:

1. Barry, C. L., McGinty, E. E., Pescosolido, B. A., & Goldman, H. H. (2014). Stigma, discrimination, treatment effectiveness, and policy: public views about drug addiction and mental illness.
2. (2018, April). *Stop Saying ‘They’re Just Junkies.’* Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/Alicia-cook/stop-saying-theyre-just-junkies_b_8881604.html.
3. Toward An Addiction-Ary: Language, Stigma, Treatment, and Policy. John F. Kelly, P Professionals. Anaheim, CA, June 2016.
4. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/Alicia-cook/stop-saying-theyre-just-junkies_b_8881604.html

Resources:

1. (2018, April). *Anti-Stigma Toolkit: A Guide to Reducing Addiction-Related Stigma*. Retrieved from <http://attcnetwork.org/regcenters/productDocs/2/Anti-Stigma%20Toolkit.pdf>
2. (2018, April). *Language of Recovery*. Retrieved from <http://attcnetwork.org/home/Language%20of%20Recovery%20071416.pdf>
3. (2018, April). *Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma*. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/sud-stigma-tool>

