

# STOP THE STIGMA

Negative language and stigma regarding substance use disorder and addiction have shown to be a key barrier to seeking and receiving treatment for people who use drugs. Stigmatizing words such as “addict” reduce a person to only their drug use. Talking about substance use disorder in a more accurate and humanizing way can reduce stigma and help people receive appropriate treatment and support.

↪ Instead of these words... Try using these! ↩

DRUG ABUSE  
SUBSTANCE ABUSE

"SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER"

"DRUG MISUSE"

"SUBSTANCE MISUSE"

Although the term “substance abuse” is widely used—including in the names of federal and state agencies—use of the term “abuse” in the context of substance use is no longer favored in the mental health community. The word “abuse” connotes violence and criminality and does not fit with a view of substance use disorder as a health condition.

Substance use disorder is a diagnosable condition that refers to drug use that has become significantly problematic in a person’s life. This term is defined in the DSM-V.

ADDICT  
ABUSER  
JUNKIE  
DRUGGIE

"PERSON WHO USES DRUGS"

"PERSON WITH A  
SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER"

"PERSON USING DRUGS  
PROBLEMATICALLY/CHAOTICALLY"

Person-first language affirms people’s individuality and dignity. It promotes the message that a person is more than just their addiction.

NOTE: How a person chooses to self-identify is up to them, and they should not be corrected or admonished if they choose not to use person-first language.

CLEAN/  
DIRTY

"STERILE/USED SYRINGES"

"POSITIVE/NEGATIVE  
DRUG TEST"

"PERSON IN RECOVERY/  
PERSON WITH PROBLEMATIC DRUG USE"

The term “dirty” is often used to describe syringes that have been used or to describe positive drug screens. People who are no longer using drugs are often referred to as “clean.” However, the clean/dirty dichotomy creates a false narrative that people who use drugs are inherently unclean.

If you’re providing a service  
or resource –  
support, don’t stigmatize.

People may use or identify with stigmatizing language based on their own history, and that’s their prerogative. Do not correct people with lived experience on their preferred way to refer to themselves. Use non-stigmatizing language to show people who use drugs that you respect them with your words.