

Say this...	...not that!	Why?
Person who uses drugs	Addict, junkie, user, druggie	Person-first language focuses on the person rather than their behaviours
Person who has a substance use disorder	Alcoholic, addict, drug problem, drug habit	People need to be recognized as individuals rather than labelled by their illnesses or actions. Person-first language promotes humanity.
Return to use	Relapse	Neutral, non-judgemental language
Drug poisoning	Overdose	Overdose implies a person knows what they are taking and intentionally takes too much. Poisoning is generally more accurate given the current adulterated/toxic drug supply.
No longer uses drugs Substance-free In recovery	Sober, clean	Dirty/clean is associated with filth and invokes shame/stigma
Sterile, new	Clean (supplies)	Dirty/clean is associated with filth and invokes shame/stigma
Substance use Substance addiction	Substance abuse, Substance Misuse	Abuse implies that substance use is a result of failed morals or willpower. Misuse implies that the person is using the substance in an incorrect way and suggests misconduct. These terms ignore the complex social, cultural, & physiological factors involved.
Testing negative	Clean (toxicology screen)	Dirty/clean is associated with filth and invokes shame/stigma
Withdrawal management	Detox	Detox implies that a person needs to be cleansed from their substance use
Person in recovery	Ex-addict, former addict	Neutral, non-judgemental language
Maintained recovery	Stayed clean	Neutral, non-judgemental language

Not “One Correct Answer”

Language is experienced and interpreted by everyone differently. Not every group or individual will have the same perspective on the “most appropriate” or “least stigmatizing” language; these are merely suggestions. The important thing is that you are reflecting on the language that you use and aiming to communicate in a respectful manner.

If you are working with clients or partners with lived experience, consider letting them lead the language used as well. Some of the terms may feel too “clinical” or scripted for people with lived experience and they may prefer to refer to themselves and their experience using their own terms.

Why is respectful language so important?

In short, stigmatizing language can:

- Discourage people from seeking help
- Affect the quality of (and access to) healthcare or social services
- Drive policies that impact health and wellbeing

Language is powerful; the language that we use and hear affects our thoughts and actions, both consciously and subconsciously. Stigma can also be internalized by people who are stigmatized, affecting the way that they see themselves and their life experiences. Hearing negative attitudes and judgements can amplify and reinforce these feelings, further driving them away from seeking support when they need it.

Stigmatizing language can also lead to policies and behaviours that isolate and marginalize people who use substances. Shifting to language that puts people first and recognizes substance use as a health issue, rather than a moral one, can lead to wider support of evidence-based, lifesaving supports and interventions.

Guiding Principles

1. **Words Matter** – be aware of the power of words and recognize their potential impact.
2. **Language Evolves** – what is acceptable language today may not be the same in a few years. Recognize that a commitment to anti-stigma language use is an ongoing journey of learning.
3. **Have an Open Mindset** – don't let the fear of using the “wrong” word stop you from having important conversations. Don't be defensive or take insult if someone suggests a different word to use. Take each experience as a learning opportunity.
4. **Humanity First** – we are all humans first and foremost. Recognize that in your thoughts, words, and actions; use person-first language and person-centered care.
5. **Be Specific** – use the language that is most comfortable for each person you are talking about. Not every member of a community is impacted by the same issues or holds the same perspectives. The best way to know what language someone prefers is to ask them.
6. **Be Critical** – before using specific terminology to describe a person, ask yourself if it is relevant. Does their use of substances need to be identified in this context? Is there a more respectful way to convey what you are trying to?