

Positive Language Guidelines

Language Use


The language used to describe concepts, communities, and human beings is of the utmost importance. Stigmatizing and negative language used to describe individuals who use substances, have a substance use disorder, or are in recovery can have an impact on their physical and mental health. At a minimum, we ask that you do not use the following terms in your remarks:

- Substance Abuse / Substance Abuser
- Addict, Alcoholic, Junkie
- Recovering “addict, alcoholic, substance abuser, junkie, etc.”
- Criminal, Felon, Convict
- Homeless
- Clean / Dirty
- Medication Assisted Treatment
- Addicted babies
- Relapse


Instead, we ask that you consider the following evidence-based alternatives when conveying your thoughts. You may also reference the easy to share infographic on page 2 of this document.


- Person with a substance use disorder (SUD)
- Person who uses drugs (PWUD)
- Substance use / substance misuse
- Person in recovery
- Person with justice-involvement; person that is justice-involved
- Person experiencing homelessness
- Positive / Negative
- Medication-Assisted Recovery
- Substance use disorder / Opioid use disorder pharmacotherapy
- Medications for addiction treatment
- Neonatal abstinence syndrome / Neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome
- Recurrence of use / recurrence of symptoms

Also, please keep in mind there are many other potentially stigmatizing and stereotypical labels and language that we often use without regard. We ask that you use your best judgement and person-first language at all times.

 Recovery Dialects	<i>Mutual Aid Meetings</i>	<i>In Public</i>	<i>With Clients</i>	<i>Medical Settings</i>	<i>Journalists</i>
Addict	✓	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP
Alcoholic	✓	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP
Substance Abuser	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP
Opioid Addict	✓	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP
Relapse	✓	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP
Medication Assisted Treatment	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP	STOP
Medication Assisted Recovery	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Person w/ a Substance Use Disorder	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Person w/ an Alcohol Use Disorder	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Person w/ an Opioid Use Disorder	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Long-term Recovery	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pharmacotherapy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Language matters but can change depending on the setting we are in. Choosing when and where to use certain language and labels can help reduce stigma and discrimination towards substance use and recovery.



 SOURCE: Ashford, R. D., Brown, A. M., & Curtis, B. (2018). Substance use, recovery, and linguistics: The impact of word choice on explicit and implicit bias. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 189, 131–138.