

# Destigmatizing Language Guide

## Why our words matter:

- People using substances avoid seeking medical care due to concerns about being lectured or judged about their substance use.<sup>1</sup>
- Health care providers are more likely to support punitive frameworks when people are described as “abusers”.<sup>3</sup>
- Patients’ perception of discrimination by health care providers predict whether or not patients remain engaged in treatment for substance use disorders.<sup>2</sup>
- Perceived stigma and discrimination among people use substances are associated with worse mental and physical health.<sup>4</sup>

## What you can do:

- Use person-first language in all situations.
- Try to speak as specifically as possible; avoid broad generalizations.
- Avoid value-laden language.
- Note that patients may use different terms to refer to themselves/peers (“I am an addict”). As care providers, it is important to acknowledge each person’s identity while also striving to eliminate stigma from our language.

## Replace the terms on the left with the terms on the right:

Instead of Saying	Try Saying
Addict/Abuser	Person with substance use disorder/Person living with substance use disorder/Person who uses drugs
Alcoholic	Person with alcohol use disorder/Person living with alcohol use disorder
Clean/Dirty Urine	Urine negative or positive for substance Substance detected or not detected Expected or unexpected result

Instead of Saying	Try Saying
Clean (person)	Person in recovery from substance use/Person in remission from substance use disorder or addiction
Criminal/Felon/Ex-Con	Person with justice involvement/Person with criminal legal system involvement
Drug Offender	Person arrested or prosecuted for substances
Fired/Terminated/Discharged	Guided to more appropriate treatment setting
Illicit	Criminalized
Manipulating	Attempting to have needs met
Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT)/Opioid Replacement Therapy	Medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) Medication for addiction treatment (MAT)
Nonadherent/Noncompliant	Not using as prescribed
Relapse/Slip	Resume use/Restart use/Recurrence of use
Strike/Deviation	Concern
Substance Abuse	Substance use (unhealthy or harmful use)/Substance use disorder (clinical diagnosis, meeting DSM-V criteria)

1. Banta-Green, C.J., Newman, A., & Kingston, S. Washington State Syringe Exchange Health Survey: 2017. Results. Seattle: Alcohol & Drug Abuse Institute, University of Washington, January 2018. <http://adai.uw.edu/pubs/pdf/2017syringeexchange-healthsurvey.pdf>
2. Brener, L., von Hippel, W., von Hippel, C., Resnick, I., & Treloar, C. (2010). Perceptions of discriminatory treatment by staff as predictors of drug treatment completion: utility of a mixed methods approach. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 29(5), 491-497.
3. Kelly, J. F., & Westerhoff, C. M. (2010). Does it matter how we refer to individuals with substance-related conditions? A randomized study of two commonly used terms. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 21(3), 202-207.
4. Ahern, J., Stuber, J., & Galea, S. (2007). Stigma, discrimination and the health of illicit drug users. *Drug & Alcohol Dependence*, 88(2), 188-196.