

# REMOVE THE STIGMA

## STIGMA HARMS THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE FAMILY



Words matter and continued use of stigmatizing language perpetuates false stereotypes, spreads misinformation, and keeps people out of care.

"Research shows that the language we use to describe [addiction] can either perpetuate or overcome the stereotypes, prejudice and lack of empathy that keep people from getting treatment they need." — Michael Botticelli, Executive Director of the Grayken Center for Addiction Medicine, Former Director of National Drug Control Policy

### Why Language Matters

The language we use influences and reflects our policies and approaches to addiction.

Different terms convey different meanings and can affect perceptions, cause and controllability, punishment or treatment.

Language can implicitly affect judgment that can perpetuate stigma/discrimination against addicted individuals.

"Changing the language and removing the stigma provides people hope that someone cares enough to help them walk this journey, because it's a difficult, scary journey and the resources available for medical care and understanding addiction are just not the same as there are for other chronic diseases." — Justin Phillips, Founder and Executive Director Overdose Lifeline



**OverdoseLifeline**

[overdoselifeline.org/stigma](https://overdoselifeline.org/stigma)

# Do This...

Call it what it is: substance use disorder or addiction (or alcohol use disorder, opioid use disorder, etc.)

Use “people first” language and refer to person with substance use disorder, person with alcohol use disorder, person with addiction, patient (if in clinical setting).

Instead of "drug problem" or "drug abuse", say "drug use", "substance use", "non-prescribed use". Don't say "abuse", simply say "use".

Avoid negative terms like addict, alcoholic, druggie, user, abuser, junkie - all of which sensationalize the disease. Instead, choose phrasing like he was addicted, people with addiction, or he was using drugs.

Don't say “clean / sober”. Say “in recovery”, “substance-free”, “well, healthy”. Don't say “stayed clean”. Say “maintained recovery”.

Say “recovery management”. Don't say “relapse prevention”. Say “withdrawal management”. Don't say “detox.”

Don't Sensationalize Addiction: Don't say “suffers from,” “afflicted with,” “victims of,” or “the scourge of” addiction. Rather, say, “he has a substance use disorder,” “she is addicted,” “people with addiction”.

Say “had a setback”, “resumed, recurrence, returned to use”, or “currently using”. Do not say “on a bender” or “relapsed, lapsed or slip” which imposes judgment and stigma.

Don't say “dirty or clean drug screen”. Say “positive or negative drug screen”.

Say “person in recovery”. Don't say “ex addict, former addict, reformed addict”. Don't say “untreated addict / alcoholic”. Say “individual not yet in recovery” or “person who is using”.

Don't say “addicted baby, drug addicted infant”. Say “baby with neonatal opioid withdrawal / neonatal abstinence syndrome”.

As the Anti Stigma Toolkit says, “addiction doesn't define who a person is, it describes what a person has. A person's addiction represents only a part of the person's life. Defining people exclusively by their addiction diminishes the wholeness of their lives.”



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