

Language & Substance Use Disorder: A Guide to Communicating About SUD

Why is the language we use important?

There is ample research to suggest that the language we use actually changes our behavior, and the behavior of those we interact with. When we change the way we discuss substance use, we are not simply being “politically correct”, we are actually changing the way the people around us perceive, understand, and respond to substance use.

Language Norms

- Emphasize that substance use disorder (SUD) is a treatable disease.
- Use “person-first” language.
- Frame the conversation as a health issue.
- Use examples of people who have reached long-term recovery.
- Discuss the fact that people can and do change! Share hope.

Retire Stigmatizing Language!

INSTEAD OF...	TRY...
Addict, junkie, alcoholic	Person with a substance use disorder (SUD)
Addiction	Substance use disorder (SUD)
Clean	Abstinent, not using
Former addict	Person in recovery
Relapse	Resurgence/re-occurrence
Drug abuse	Drug use or drug misuse
Dirty	Actively using
Crazy	Experiencing a mental health crisis
Suicidal	Having thoughts of self-harm/suicide

But what if someone calls himself/herself an “addict”?

“Addict” and “alcoholic” are terms used in anonymous communities as a part of their culture and fellowship, and they have been used for a long time. If someone chooses to self-identify as an “addict” or “alcoholic”, it is not up to anyone else to correct them, because they are using that term in a way that has assisted with their own self-acceptance and recovery. However, even if someone self-identifies as an “addict”, you should continue to refer to them as a person with SUD or a person in recovery (unless they ask you otherwise).

What do I do if I use the wrong language by mistake?

Even the most seasoned professional in the field is going to use the wrong language every once in a while- harmful language is ingrained in all of us, unfortunately. As with all mistakes, the best thing we can do is take responsibility and apologize. Use it as a learning opportunity! Explain to the people you are speaking with why the term is incorrect, and why another term might be more appropriate.

“Person-First” Language: Talk about the person before what they are experiencing. People are *multi-dimensional*; one disorder, negative situation, or experience does not describe the whole human.

- Examples:**
- “Addict” → person with substance use disorder
 - “Homeless person” → person experiencing homelessness
 - “Disabled person” → person with a disability