

UISCE

Advocacy for People who use Drugs

LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

Stigmatising language	Rationale	Preferred language/terminology
Addict, User, Junkie	These terms are demeaning because they label a person by his/her condition. By making no distinction between the person and the condition, they deny the dignity and humanity of the individual. In addition, these labels imply a permanency to the condition, leaving no room for a change in status.	Person who uses drugs, member of the community of people who use drugs, patient (if referring to an individual receiving treatment services).
Abuse	Problem with the term: "abuse" is stigmatizing because: (1) it negates the fact that addictive disorders are a medical condition; (2) it blames the condition solely on the individual, ignoring environmental and genetic factors, as well as the ability of substances to alter brain chemistry; (3) it absolves those selling and promoting addictive substances of any wrong doing; and (4) it feeds into the stigma experienced not only by people who use drugs, but also family members and the addiction treatment field.	Use, hazardous use, risky use.
Clean, Dirty (when referring to drug test results)	Problem with the terms: Commonly used to describe drug test results, these terms are stigmatizing because they associate symptoms of a condition (i.e. positive drug tests) with filth.	Negative, positive, substance-free.
Habit or Drug Habit	Calling addictive disorders a habit denies the medical nature of the condition and implies that resolution of the problem is simply a matter of willpower in being able to stop the habitual behavior.	Person who uses drugs, active addiction.

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<i>Tackle, Fight, Combat</i> (when referring to measures used)	These words are stigmatizing because they associate the social and medical interventions required to support people who use drugs with warfare terminology.	Address
<i>Replacement or Substitution Therapy</i>	These terms imply that treatment medications such as methadone and buprenorphine are equal to street drugs like heroin. The term suggests a lateral move from illegal addiction to legal addiction, and this does not accurately characterize the true nature of the treatment.	Treatment, medication-assisted treatment, medication.
<i>User</i>	The term is stigmatizing because it labels a person by his/her behavior. It is also misleading because the term user has come to refer to one who is engaged in risky misuse of substances, but 'use' alone is not necessarily problematic.	Person who uses drugs

Effective terminology

The following terms are considered effective in furthering public understanding of addictive disorders as a medical issue, which, in turn, provides impact in reducing stigma and stereotyping.

Addiction

Why it works: This widely understood term describes “uncontrollable, compulsive drug seeking and use, even in the face of negative health and social consequences.”

There is a distinction between addiction and physical dependence, although the words are often incorrectly used interchangeably. Addiction involves both social and health problems, whereas physical dependence only involves health.

Addiction Free

Why it works: Indicates the patient is free from the dangerous compulsive behaviors of addiction. Less stigmatizing than “clean” or “sober” yet shows the person is no longer in active addiction.

Addiction Survivor

This terminology is in line with other life-threatening diseases. (i.e. cancer survivor) It is a positive indication of a person’s disease status. It is less stigmatizing than “recovering addict”, especially to people unfamiliar with recovery language. It also indicates that a person’s treatment has triumphed over active addiction and shows that the person is substantially past the initial phases of recovery, unlike “in recovery” which doesn’t differentiate between days or decades of addiction-free life.