

Words Matter

Terms to Use to Remove Bias from Your Language

It is important to be intentional when communicating with or about patients. The language we use impacts the way care is received. Terms such as ‘addict,’ ‘drug seeker,’ and ‘junkie’ can be extremely stigmatizing. Instead, refer to patients using ‘**person first**’ language, such as a ‘person who uses drugs.’ This acknowledges the person first, rather than identifying them by their relationship to drugs.

INSTEAD OF...	USE...	BECAUSE...
Addict User Substance or drug abuser Junkie Alcoholic Drunk Former addict Reformed addict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person with opioid/substance use disorder or person with opioid addiction ● Patient ● Person in recovery or long-term recovery <p>For heavy alcohol use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unhealthy, harmful, or hazardous alcohol use ● Person with alcohol use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person-first language. ● The change shows that a person ‘has’ a problem rather than ‘is’ the problem. ● The terms to avoid elicit negative associations, punitive attitudes, and individual blame.
IV drug user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person who injects drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person-first language.
Habit Relapse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Substance use disorder ● Drug addiction ● Return to use/slip 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inaccurately implies that a person is choosing to use substances or can choose to stop. ● ‘Habit’ may undermine the seriousness of the disease.
Clean	<p>For toxicology screen results:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing negative <p>Referring to a person:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being in remission or recovery ● Abstinent from drugs ● Not drinking or taking drugs ● Not currently using drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use clinically accurate, non-stigmatizing terminology the same way it would be used for other medical conditions. ● Set an example with your own language when treating patients who might use stigmatizing slang. ● Use of such terms may evoke negative and punitive subconscious thoughts.
Dirty	<p>For toxicology screen results:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing positive <p>Referring to a person:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person who uses drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use clinically accurate, non-stigmatizing terminology the same way it would be used for other medical conditions. ● May decrease patients’ sense of hope and self-efficacy for change.

(This information was adapted from a NIDA Words Matter handout drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/nidamed_wordsmatter3_508.pdf)

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