

Alternatives to Stigmatic Language

Use this	Instead of	Because
Person who uses drugs Person with a SUD	Addict, Junkie, Substance/drug abuser, User, Substance dependence, Druggie	Using person-first language shows that a SUD is an illness. It shows that a person “has” a disorder rather than “is” the problem. Avoids negative attitudes and shame.
Testing Positive (for toxicology)	Dirty (for toxicology), Failing a drug test	Using medically accurate terminology in the same way as other medical conditions reduces SUD stigma. Using these terms can decrease a person’s sense of hope and self-confidence to enter their recovery journey.
Person in recovery/long-term recovery Person who previously used drugs	Former Addict, Reformed Addict	A focus on person-first language.
Use (for illicit substances) Misuse (for prescription medication)	Abuse, Substance abuse	“Abuse” is no longer a drug use category in the DSM-V. “Abuse” has a high association with negative judgments and punishments. Prescribers set parameters for what medication should be used for and how. If the use of the medication is outside of the prescription (dosage, frequency, method of administration) it is “misuse.”

PREVENTION FIRST

Substance Use Treatment Training
& Technical Assistance Center (SATAC)

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Substance Use Disorder	Habit/Drug Habit, Drug Problem	“Habit” implies a person is “choosing” to use a substance or can “choose” to stop, which is inaccurate. SUD has a biological/physical effect. Describing SUD as a “habit” makes the illness seem less serious than it is.
In remission or recovery Abstinent from substances Not using substances Testing negative (for toxicology)	Clean	Using medical terminology that is consistent with other illnesses or chronic conditions helps reduce stigma.
Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) Medication for Substance Use Disorders Opioid Agonist Therapy	Opioid Substitution, Trading one drug for another, Medication Assisted Therapy (MAT), Replacement Therapy	It is a misconception that MOUD/MAR is “trading one substance for another”. “MAT” implies that MOUD has a temporary or supplemental role in a person’s treatment rather than a standard of care. MOUD are critical tools in a person’s treatment plan, like how other psychiatric medications are understood (such as antidepressant or antipsychotic medications) in a person’s recovery journey. SUD should not be treated differently from other chronic conditions (insulin is not considered “medication-assisted therapy for diabetes”).

Use this	Instead of	Because
Newborn exposed to (substance) Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome	Addicted baby, Baby with addiction, Born addicted, Drug baby	Person-first language. Focuses on clinical management of the baby's symptoms rather than making a moral judgment on the parent. Babies cannot be born with a SUD; they are exhibiting withdrawal symptoms. SUD is defined by compulsive use despite negative consequences, and babies cannot make that decision. Uses medical terminology
Withdrawal Management	Detox	"Detox" implies a need for cleansing, inferring that people who use drugs are "dirty."
Return to Use Reoccurrence of Substance Use	Relapse, Lapse	Focusing on neutral and objective language reduces stigma.