



# Words Matter When Providers Talk About Addiction

Research shows that words matter when we talk to our patients and colleagues about addiction. When health care providers use stigmatizing language, they are significantly less likely to give high-quality care to people with a substance use disorder. Plus, their patients do not recover as well.



## Stigma Stands in Our Way

Stigma is the number one barrier to patients seeking and receiving effective treatment for substance use disorder. As health care providers, we have the power to change the language we use to help our patients with substance

use disorders regain their self-esteem, encourage our colleagues to provide high-quality care, and help our communities understand that addiction is a medical condition as real as any other.

## Avoiding Stigmatizing Language

Below are stigmatizing words and phrases you should avoid, as well as terms you should consider using instead.



**Stigmatizing Language:**  
**Addict, Abuser, Junkie**

These terms label a person by his or her illness. By making no distinction between the person and the disease, they deny the dignity and humanity of the individual.



**Recommended Language:**  
**Person with a substance misuse disorder, person with a substance use disorder, person experiencing alcohol/ drug problem**



**Stigmatizing Language:**  
**Clean, dirty**  
(when referring to drug test results)

These terms associate illness symptoms (i.e. positive drug tests) with filth.



**Recommended Language:**  
**Negative, positive, substance-free.**





### Stigmatizing Language: **Habit or Drug Habit**

These terms deny the medical nature of the condition and imply that resolving the problem is simply a matter of willpower in being able to stop a habitual behavior.



**Recommended Language: Substance misuse disorder, alcohol and drug disorder, alcohol and drug disease, active addiction.**



### Stigmatizing Language: **Replacement or Substitution Therapy**

This term suggests that by taking medications to support recovery, a person is making a lateral move from *illegal* addiction to *legal* addiction. This does not accurately describe the nature of treatment.

Addiction is marked by uncontrollable compulsive behavior. The first goal of addiction treatment is to stop dangerous addictive behavior. With successful drug therapy, as part of a comprehensive treatment plan for substance use disorder, the dangerous addictive behavior is stopped not replaced.



**Recommended Language: Treatment, medication-assisted treatment, medication.**



### Stigmatizing Language: **Abuse**

This term doesn't acknowledge that an addictive disorder is a medical condition. It blames the illness solely on the individual, ignoring environmental and genetic factors, as well as the ability of substances to alter brain chemistry.



**Recommended Language: Misuse, harmful use, inappropriate use, hazardous use, problem use, risky use.**



## There is Hope

We can heal our communities through changing the language we use to talk about addiction.



Text **'HEALTHCAREHERO'** to 97779 to receive videos, quizzes, facts, and more to grow your knowledge about successfully treating patients with opioid use disorder.



Also visit the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's website at [www.npaihb.org/opioid](http://www.npaihb.org/opioid) for patient handouts, posters, and more.