

Language is powerful—especially when discussing alcohol and other drugs and the people who use them. Stigmatising language reinforces negative stereotypes. “Person-centred” language focuses on the person, not their substance use.

When working with people who use alcohol and other drugs...

 **try this**

 **instead of this**

substance use, non-prescribed use

abuse misuse problem use non-compliant use

person who uses/injects drugs

drug user/abuser

person with a dependence on...

addict junkie druggie alcoholic

person experiencing drug dependence

suffering from addiction has a drug habit

person who has stopped using drugs

clean sober drug-free

person with lived experience of drug dependence

ex-addict former addict used to be a...

person disagrees

lacks insight in denial resistant unmotivated

treatment has not been effective/chooses not to

not engaged non-compliant

person's needs are not being met

drug seeking manipulative splitting

currently using drugs

using again fallen off the wagon had a setback

no longer using drugs

stayed clean maintained recovery

positive/negative urine drug screen

dirty/clean urine

used/unused syringe

dirty/clean needle dirties

pharmacotherapy is treatment

replacing one drug for another

Person-centred language in non government AOD services

About this resource

Person-centred language focuses on the person, not their substance use. It is a simple and effective way of showing you respect a person's agency, dignity and worth.

This resource has been developed for people working in non government alcohol and other drugs (AOD) services. It has been developed in consultation with people who use drugs.

The purpose of this resource is to provide workers with guidelines on how to use language to empower clients and reinforce a person-centred approach.

Why have we developed this resource?

Our attitudes towards AOD use and how we respond rests on the concepts and language we use.

Words like 'addict', 'clean' and 'dirty' reinforce negative stereotypes and encourage judgement, blaming and shaming.

Fear of stigma and being labelled as a 'drug user' can and does prevent people from accessing treatment and support. Use of such language also contributes to poorer treatment outcomes.

Being mindful about the words we use is not about being politically correct. Language is powerful and it is the power of language which makes it an important practice tool; a tool to empower clients and fight stigma.

What this resource is not

This resource is not an exhaustive list of 'dos' and 'don'ts'. Language is complex. What is considered 'person-centred' will depend on the individual and the context. Terms, like 'recovery' for example, might be stigmatising for some, while others may prefer such terminology. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. What is important is that we are respectful and person-centred in our approach.



To learn more, visit the International Network of People who Use Drugs website: www.inpud.net.

Better practice guidelines

When working with people who use drugs:

- Don't define a person by their substance use or diagnosis—emphasise the person first. For example, say 'person who injects drugs' instead of 'injecting drug user' or 'person living with hepatitis C' instead of 'they're infected with hep C.'
- Don't impose your language on others. Where appropriate ask the person what language they prefer and respect their wishes.
- Choose terms that are strengths-based and empowering. Avoid terms like 'non-compliant'; use terms like 'chooses not to' or 'decided against' which affirm a person's agency, choice, and preferences.
- Be mindful of the implications of your language. Avoid terms like 'clean' and 'dirty' when talking about urine drug screen results. Consider also the implications of referring to opioid pharmacotherapies as 'substitution' or 'replacement' treatment.
- Avoid expressions like 'has a drug habit' or 'suffering from addiction' which can disempower a person by trivialising or sensationalising their AOD use.
- Use language that is accessible. Don't speak above a person's level of understanding or assume that a person is not capable of understanding. Avoid slang and medical jargon which can be misinterpreted or cause confusion when used incorrectly.
- Don't make assumptions about a person's identity—be inclusive. For example, ask about a person's preferred gender pronouns or, if you are unsure, use gender neutral terms like 'their', 'they' or 'them'. Better still, avoid unnecessary references to gender altogether by using the person's name.
- Be aware of the context of the language being used. Some terms are ok when used by members of a specific community as a means of claiming identity; the same terms can be stigmatising when used by people outside that community.
- The community of people who use drugs, like all communities, can suffer from lateral discrimination. Be careful not to take on the biases of others. Your language should respect a diversity of experience and empower the person who is looking to you for help.
- Remember, we don't just use words to communicate. Use non-verbal cues, like eye contact, tone of voice and body language to demonstrate you respect the dignity and worth of all people.

References

- International Network of People who Use Drugs (2011). Statement and Position paper on Language, Identity, Inclusivity and Discrimination.
- International Network of People who Use Drugs (2015). Drug User Peace Initiative: Stigmatising People Who Use Drugs.
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- Mental Health Coordinating Council (2015). Language of Mental Health Recovery.