



Words Matter When We Talk About Addiction

Why is it Important to Use Healing Words?

Research studies show that language matters when we talk about opioids. When doctors use stigmatizing language, they are less likely to give good care to people addicted to opioids. Plus, their patients do not recover as well.

People with opioid addiction benefit from community support, non-judgemental healthcare providers, and a strong circle of relatives and relations who can walk the path to recovery with them. In order to be a good support for people with opioid addiction, it is important to use kind and respectful language.



Whole Person Language

Kind and respectful language honors people with opioid addiction as whole people. It does not define them only by their opioid use.

How to Use Whole Person Language

Instead of saying "drug user," "addict," or "junkie," it is better to say "person who uses drugs," "person with an opioid use disorder," or "person with a substance use disorder."

Why?

Words like "drug user," "addict," and "junkie" are stigmatizing. They label a person by only one activity they do in life. The truth is that people who use drugs have families, hobbies, interests, histories and futures outside of their drug use. Honor them as whole people.



Avoiding Stigmatizing Language

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



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

These words associate a positive drug test with filth. Anyone can become addicted to opioids, and having a problem with opioids does not make a person (or their test results) dirty.



Recommended Language:
Negative, positive, or substance-free test result.



Stigmatizing Language:
Drug Habit

This term suggests that a person with opioid addiction simply needs more willpower to stop using opioids. The problem: opioid use disorder is a medical condition that impacts the brain. Recovery often requires medical treatment to help with cravings and behavior change.



Recommended Language:
Substance use disorder,
opioid use disorder.

There is Hope

We can heal our communities through educating ourselves and others, supporting each other, and seeking help when we need it.



Text 'OPIOIDS' to 94449 to receive videos, quizzes, facts, and more to grow your knowledge about opioids.



Also visit the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's website at www.npaihb.org/opioid to learn more about treatments, reversing an overdose, and other important topics.

This fact sheet was adapted based on materials by The National Alliance of Advocates for Buprenorphine Treatment.