

Words Matter: Using People-First, Non-Stigmatizing Language

The way healthcare professionals talk about addiction affects the stigma attached to opioid use disorder, and may influence whether or not people seek treatment. Using clinically appropriate and medically accurate language that recognizes OUD as a disease rather than a moral failing will help to create a stigma-free environment prioritizing treatment and recovery. When in doubt, use people-first language. People-first language prioritizes the personhood of every patient over descriptive social identities and stigmatizing labels.

Words to Avoid	Words to Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addict • User • Abuser • Junkie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with an opioid/substance use disorder • Person who uses drugs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug habit • Abuse • Problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opioid/substance use disorder • Use, misuse, harmful use • Regular, risky, unhealthy, or heavy use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean • Former/reformed addict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person in recovery • Abstinent • Not actively using
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dirty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively Using
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean drug screen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing negative for substance use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dirty drug screen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing positive for substance use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substitution or replacement therapy • Medication assisted treatment (MAT) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relapse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resumed • Recurrence of symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addicted babies/born addicted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies born with opioid dependency/neonatal abstinence syndrome

Adapted from the following resources, read to learn more about people-first language:

- Grayken Center for Addiction – Words Matter
- Sum of US - A Progressive's Style Guide
- Ohio Language First Team - Using Person-First Language across the Continuum of Care for Substance Use Disorders & Other Addictions
- Michigan Department of Health and Human Services - End the Stigma

