

STIGMA:

What Is It and Why Words Matter

Stigma is discrimination against a group of people, a place, or a nation. For people with a substance use disorder (SUD), stigma often includes false beliefs that individuals are dangerous, unable to manage treatment or are responsible for their condition.

While substance use disorders are chronic but treatable medical conditions, research indicates that stigma remains due in part to a lack of understanding about the disorders and their effective treatments. **Substance use disorders are more stigmatized than any other medical condition,** and research has shown that people with SUD face stigma at every stage of care.

When people experience stigma, they can become isolated and reluctant to seek treatment or support. Stigma can negatively impact public health, the economy, incarceration rates and public discourse, to name a few.



Addressing Stigma Through Language

Addressing stigma through changing language about SUDs involves **shifting the way we talk about them** to promote understanding, reduce judgment, and encourage supportive attitudes.

For individuals and families seeking recovery, words matter. One of the best examples of a major shift in language is with the terms “drug abuse” or “substance abuser.” The less stigmatizing term “substance use disorder,” recognizes the chronic and progressive nature of addiction. Terms like “substance abuse” and “substance abuser” have been shown to negatively influence the perceptions of both the general public and healthcare providers, leading to a belief that individuals who use substances deserve punishment rather than treatment or support.



We can replace words with a negative connotation with smart language that aligns with science and common medical terminology. A few ways we can accomplish this include:

- **Use Person-First Language:** Instead of saying “addict,” say “person with a substance use disorder.” Using person-first language emphasizes that the individual is more than their condition, reducing labels and promoting dignity.
- **Choose Neutral, Non-Judgmental Language:** Instead of saying “clean,” say “in recovery.” Neutral terms avoid implying moral judgment, fostering a more compassionate view of those affected.
- **Highlight Recovery and Hope:** Instead of saying “suffering from drug addiction,” say “on a pathway to recovery.” Focusing on recovery emphasizes the potential for positive change.

Implementing Language Change



We can replace words that have a negative connotation with smart language that aligns with science and common medical terminology. A few ways we can accomplish this include:

- **Training and Education:** Offer training to healthcare providers, educators, and media professionals on the significance of using non-stigmatizing language.
- **Public Campaigns:** Initiate awareness campaigns that encourage the use of respectful and accurate language when talking about substance use disorders.
- **Policy and Guidelines:** Promote the adoption of person-first language in official documents, policies, and media guidelines.
- **Community Conversations:** Encourage community leaders and influencers to model and promote positive language changes.

Changing language is a powerful tool in reducing stigma around substance use disorders. By adopting person-first, neutral, and compassionate language, we can foster a more understanding and supportive environment for people in recovery. This shift not only benefits those directly affected by substance use disorder, but also contributes to a broader societal change in how we perceive and respond to these conditions.

Sources:

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