



Words Matter

Language matters.

Individuals with substance related disorders face discrimination and prejudice due to lack of understanding about the disease. The stigma surrounding substance related disorders can be reduced by understanding the evolving language used to describe these topics. Because stigma can be directed at an individual by others (social stigma), can be internalized (self-stigma), or can be systematic (structural stigma), **everyone has an opportunity to use language that challenges drug-related stigma.**

Please note: Sometimes people directly affected by behavioral health disorders may choose to self-identify in different ways, and those choices should be respected. The aim of this guide is not to police other people’s language, which may vary based on their lived experiences and setting. For example, someone self-identifying in a meeting may use different words than a healthcare professional, journalist, or even a family member.

Change the Script

Instead of	Try this Non-Judgmental Alternative
Abstinence-based, or Abstinence-only	Not including a medication
Addict, or Junkie, or Substance abuser	Person with a substance related disorder, or Substance use disorder, or Drug user
Alcoholic	Person with an alcohol related disorder, or Person with a serious/severe alcohol use disorder
Clean	In recovery, or In remission, or Recovering from
Clean (urine test)	Negative for substance X, or As expected
Dirty	A person still using substances, or Living with a substance related disorder

Dirty (urine test)	Positive for substance X, or Unexpected
Drug-free	Not including a medication
Drug habit or Habit	Substance related disorder
Drug abuse or Substance abuse	Substance related disorder, or addictive disorder
Former or reformed addict/alcoholic	Person in long-term recovery, or Person in recovery, or Person in remission, or Person in sustained remission or long-term recovery
Graduated	Successfully completed an episode of treatment
Mentally ill	Person living with a mental health disorder
Methadone clinic	Opioid treatment program
Non-compliant	Use descriptive terms geared towards stage of change (e.g., thinking about quitting use), or Continued use of substances, or Lapse in recovery
Opioid replacement, or Opioid substitution therapy	Opioid medication, or Medication treatment with X, or Medication supported recovery
Recreational, casual, or experimental users (as opposed to those with a substance use disorder)	People who use drugs, or People starting to use drugs, or People who are new to drug use
Self-help	Self-directed, or Mutual aid, or Mutual support
Sober	Living in recovery, or Living in wellness, or Living in long term recovery or wellness, or Healthy