

Parallel Recovery–Support for Families

Why Language Matters

You have most likely heard the childhood saying...*sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me*. The problem with that saying is that words do hurt. In fact, words can become grenades that leave a deep impact.

When my son was in active addiction, the words that he heard spoken to him replaced who he was as a person. He no longer was "funny", "adventurous" and "loving". Instead he became "useless", "an addict" and "selfish". At a time when he was at his most vulnerable, those words became attacks and labels that erased his identity. And I am sorry to say, that at times, the most impactful words were spoken by me.

For people struggling with mental health and addiction challenges, words and labels begin to erase their humanity. They believe those words and they also begin to believe that they serve no purpose, have no opportunities and deserve no hope.

Spoken words cannot be un-said. They hold great power to both build a person up or add to their destruction.

With our words, we can be compassionate, and in turn, become part of the solution-leaving room for the opportunity for others to choose better for themselves.

The chart below from NIDA can help you choose words to reduce stigma and use person first language when talking about addiction.

Talking About Yourself or Others with Substance Use Disorder

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Person with a substance use disorder (SUD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Addict● User● Substance or drug abuser● Junkie	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Using person-first language shows that SUD is an illness.● Using these words shows that a person with a SUD "has" a problem/illness, rather than "is" the problem.● The terms avoid elicit negative associations, punitive attitudes, and individual blame.

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person with alcohol use disorder 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Person who misuses alcohol/engages in unhealthy/hazardous alcohol use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alcoholic ● Drunk 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <u>Person in recovery or long-term recovery</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Former addict ● Reformed addict 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing positive (on a drug screen) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dirty ● Failing a drug test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use medically accurate terminology the same way it would be used for other medical conditions. ● These terms may decrease a person's sense of hope and self-efficacy for change.

Talking about Using Substances

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Substance use disorder ● Drug addiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Habit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Habit" implies that a person is <i>choosing</i> to use substances or can choose to stop. This implication is inaccurate. ● Describing SUD as a habit makes the illness seem less serious than it is.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use (for illicit drugs) ● Misuse (for prescription medications used other than prescribed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The term "abuse" was found to have a high association with negative judgments and punishment. ● Use outside of the parameters of how medications were prescribed is misuse.

Talking about Recovery and Treatment

Use...	Instead of...	Because...
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Use...	Instead of...	Because...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medication treatment for OUD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opioid substitution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It is a misconception that medications merely “substitute” one drug or “one addiction” for another.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medications for OUD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Replacement therapy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The term MAT implies that medication should have a supplemental or temporary role in treatment. Using “MOUD” aligns with the way other psychiatric medications are understood (e.g., antidepressants, antipsychotics), as critical tools that are central to a patient’s treatment plan.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opioid agonist therapy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medication-assisted treatment (MAT) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pharmacotherapy 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Medication for a substance use disorder 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being in remission or recovery 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abstinent from drugs 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of medical terminology (the same way you would for other illnesses) can help reduce stigma.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not drinking or taking drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clean 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing negative (on a drug screen) 		



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Helpful links

[SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Locator](#)

[SAMHSA Substance Use Treatment Locator](#)

[SAMHSA National Helpline](#)

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