

Changing our language

Words are important. If you want to care for something, you call it a flower:

If you want to kill something, you call it a weed.” – Don Coyhis

Language is powerful. It reflects our values and beliefs, and impacts our thoughts and actions. Much of the language society uses to describe people who use alcohol/other drugs is negative and degrading. Terms like “abuser,” “junkie,” “addict,” “drunk,” “user” perpetuates stigma and discrimination,* which affects both the individual's self-esteem as well as their treatment by others. The result is that people become marginalized and alienated from the very supports they need, including health and social services.

There is no other health issue to for which the term “abuse” is used.i Stigmatizing language does not help people with substance use issues to improve their lives. It also speaks to a totality of identity that is neither fair nor accurate. Individuals are more than their substance use; they are people first. They are also mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, musicians and artists, students and teachers, and much more.

A study about language used by addiction treatment providers found that when individuals were referred to as “substance abusers” they were seen as “perpetrators” engaging in wilful misconduct, and more punitive interventions were recommended. When people were said to have a “substance use disorder” they were viewed more as “victims” of a medical condition, and treatment options were recommended.ii This study shows that even among highly trained clinicians, variations in language can directly impact the type of treatment they provide to someone seeking help.

Instead of:	Drug abuser, substance abuser, and addict
Try using:	People who consume alcohol and other drugs, people with substance use issues
Instead of:	Drug abuse and substance abuse
Try using:	Drug use and substance use
Instead of:	Addiction
Try using:	Substance use issue

It is important to note that while we should not attach negative labels to other people, individuals should be allowed to self-identify as they wish. Some people seek to “reclaim” negative language as a way of taking the power of that language back for themselves. This is similar to what has happened in the LGBTQ2 (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two-Spirited) communities with words such as “queer.”

* The Oxford English Dictionary defines stigma as "a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person", and discrimination as "the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people."

i White, W., Kelly, J.F. (2010). Alcohol/Drug/Substance Abuse: The History and (Hopeful) Demise of a Pernicious Label. Commentary.

ii Kelly, J.F., & Westerhoff, C.M., (2009). Does it matter how we refer to individuals with substance-related conditions? A randomized study of two commonly used terms. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, in press.