

Language Matters: communicating about people, alcohol, and drugs

The language used when speaking about or referring to people who use drugs, including alcohol, has a huge impact on how individuals view themselves and how others view them.

Words can be alienating, defining people solely by consumption of a substance, designating them as 'others'; inferior or morally flawed.

Why should we be mindful of language used?

Stigma remains a significant barrier for people with a history of problem alcohol or drug use. As a result, people can become excluded from mainstream society. Structural and public stigma perpetuates self stigma, resulting in barriers to support, and recovery. Families are affected by stigma and language can also prejudice professionals.

What makes this important?

People who experience alcohol or drug problems, either through use or by association, often experience the most stigma in society. Negative attitudes and stigma from society, from professionals within services, and self-stigmatisation, can be one of the biggest barriers to accessing treatment, community services and other activities. Stigma needs to be challenged across services and society ([Rights, Respect and Recovery, Scottish Government, 2018](#)).

How should we communicate?

People with a history of drug dependence are too often demonised in the media. Viewing problem drug and alcohol use as akin to other health issues will help to address stigma and discrimination. Instead of a condemnatory tone, a respectful, compassionate tone can be adopted. Health outcomes improve for people who are described and treated in a non-judgemental manner.

What difference will it make?

Attitudes and behaviour can change. Challenging stigma benefits everyone in society, as it helps to build equality and tackle inequality. By reducing stigma people will feel a greater connection to society, more included and more likely to access treatment and support for recovery.

Groups to be particularly mindful about:

Women - Although overall men drink more than women, there is more stigma attached to women's drinking. Be mindful of this inequity when communicating.

Babies - Babies born to mothers who are drug or alcohol dependant are not 'addicted'. They can experience neonatal withdrawal.

Language is fluid and changes over time. As a result of the evolving discussion around best language to use to discuss substance use, this document will be monitored and revised as necessary. While language is significant, it is also important to be mindful of using non-stigmatising images when communicating. Try to use only neutral images, and avoid images of stereotypes of overly positive or negative connotations.

We encourage the use of ‘people first’ language; language that focuses first on the person, not the behaviour (e.g. people who use drugs). We do this as it reminds us to be compassionate and that we are talking about human beings. People with **Rights**, who deserve **Respect**, and should be supported in their **Recovery**.

Where Substance is referred to in table below, this includes alcohol.

Use ✓	Don't Use ✘
Substance / drug use, non-prescribed use	Substance / drug misuse, problem use or abuse
Person who uses drugs / injects drugs	Drug user / abuser
Person with non-problem(atic) drug use Person who occasionally uses drugs	Recreational, casual, experimental users
Person with [drug] dependence, person with problem(atic) drug use, person with problem(atic) [substance] use, person who uses drugs, person with [substance] problems person with lived / living experience	Addict, drug / substances abuser, alcoholic, jakie, junkie, druggie, stoner, dope head, pothead, smack head, crackhead, zombie, etc.
Person with problem(atic) drug use, person with problem(atic) [substance] use	Drug habit, addicted to
Person in recovery, person in long term recovery, person who has stopped using drugs person who has used drugs, abstinent, sterile (as in “needles”)	Clean, former addict, reformed addict
Actively uses drugs, positive for substance use	Dirty (as in “dirty screen”)
Respond, program, address, manage	Fight, counter, combat drugs and other combat language
Safe(r) (drug) consumption facility	Fix rooms
Person who injects drugs	Injecting drug user
Opioid substitution therapy	Opioid replacement therapy
Completed suicide / died by suicide	Committed suicide
Challenging lives, difficult lives, complex daily routine	Chaotic lifestyles

Further sources of guidance:

<https://www.sdf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Moving-Beyond-People-First-Language.pdf>

<https://www.samaritans.org/media-centre/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide>
<https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-guidelines-for-reporting-mental-health-and-death-by-suicide.html>

[https://www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/our-services/general-services/alcohol-and-drugs-partnership-\(adp\)-support-team/drug-and-alcohol-stigma/](https://www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/our-services/general-services/alcohol-and-drugs-partnership-(adp)-support-team/drug-and-alcohol-stigma/)

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