



Words Matter

Terms to use, terms to avoid, and why

Talking About Yourself or Others with Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

- SUD is a chronic brain disease.
- Use person-first language to show that SUD is an illness and the person with SUD “has” an illness, rather than “is” the problem/illness.
- Suggested terms avoid negative associations, punitive attitudes, and individual blame.
- Use medically accurate terminology as we would for other medical conditions.
- Stigmatizing language may decrease a person’s sense of hope and self-efficacy for change.

Talking About Using Substances

- “Habit” implies that a person is choosing to use substances or can choose to stop; this is inaccurate.
- Describing SUD as a habit makes the illness seem less serious than it is.
- The term “abuse” was found to have a high association with negative judgments and punishment.

Say ...	Instead of ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with a substance use disorder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Person with opioid use disorder (OUD) ◦ Person with alcohol use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addict • User • Substance/drug abuser • Junkie
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with alcohol use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcoholic • Drunk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person in recovery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Person who previously used drugs 	<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"> • Being in recovery or remission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newborn exposed to substances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Baby with neonatal abstinence syndrome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addicted baby

Say ...	Instead of ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance use disorder (SUD) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Opioid use disorder (oud) ◦ Alcohol use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habit • Addiction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use exceeding prescriber guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abuse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misuse or overuse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medication Supported Recovery (MSR) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Medication for opioid use disorder or a substance use disorder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opioid substitution • Replacement therapy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substituting one drug for another

It is a common myth that medications “substitute” one drug or “one addiction” for another. Medications help manage withdrawal symptoms, reduce cravings, and help individuals achieve and maintain recovery.



Adapted from: Words Matter, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Updated July 2024

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