Words Matter

ERIE COUNTY Overdose Prevention Task Force

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.

Say ...	Instead of ...

Person with a substance use disorder
  ○ Person with opioid use disorder (OUD)
  ○ Person with alcohol use disorder
	Addict
	User
	Substance/drug abuser
	Junkie

Person with alcohol use disorder	Alcoholic Drunk
Person in recovery ○ Person who previously used drugs	Former addict Reformed addict
Testing positive (on a drug screen)	Dirty Failing a drug test
Being in recovery or remission	Clean
Newborn exposed to substances ○ Baby with neonatal abstinence syndrome	Addicted baby

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 ...

Substance use disorder (SUD)
  ○ Opioid use disorder (oud)
  ○ Alcohol use disorder
	Habit
	Addiction

Use exceeding prescriber guidelines	Abuse
Use	Misuse or overuse
Medication Supported Recovery (MSR) ○ Medication for opioid use disorder or a substance use disorder	Opioid substitution Replacement therapy Substituting one drug for another
Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)	

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.

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