



Healthy Language Guidelines

Stigma stems from society and the human brain's need to categorize everything, even people. While you are not to blame for creating stigma, you are responsible for ending the cycle with you. We are taught societal norms from birth all the way to adulthood. Stigma comes in all forms, as outright as a slur and as subjective as a character portrayal in a TV show or newspaper comic. We subconsciously learn stigma from the media we watch, the community atmosphere and especially your parents. But how can you change it if you don't understand it?

RESOURCE: <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-09/CCSA-Language-and-Stigma-in-Substance-Use-Addiction-Guide-2019-en.pdf>

RESOURCE: <https://www.shatterproof.org/about-addiction/stigma/stigma-reducing-language>

Healthy Language and Stigma

Stigma is any attitude, belief or behaviour that discriminates against people.

For example, it is important to remember that a substance use disorder should be treated as a medical condition. Shifting language to more accurately reflect the nature of the health condition can lead to increased support.

We reinforce stigma with the words we choose, how we treat others and how we view ourselves. Most of us encounter stigma in our daily lives and we can amplify or extend it without meaning to.

Stigma can look like:

- prejudice towards a person's identity by saying that they 'are' the problem, rather than saying they 'have' a problem
- Belittling a person's value based on their use of substances or housing circumstance
- Dehumanizing a person through labels

WE INTERNALIZE ALL OF THIS. For instance:

We believe, as people who use substances, we will not receive help if we ask for it. We hold a sense of shame that stops us from seeking help and feel we are not heard, seen or cared about.

Why is it important to use person FIRST Language?

First of all, what is person first language? Its language that acknowledges someone as a person before describing their personal attributes or health conditions. Person-first language does not identify people by secondary or incidental qualities or conditions.

A) Instead of saying, you're homeless, say 'you're experiencing homelessness.' Think about that sentence: You are homeless. You are not one word. You are not one characterization. You are not 'homeless.' That's not all you are. It's just an experience you are having.

B) Instead of saying, you're an addict, a user or an abuser, say 'you have a substance use disorder.'

C) Instead of saying 'substitution or replacement therapy' when you're referring to methadone or suboxone, say 'treatment or medication for addiction.' Saying replacement therapy makes it sound like you think we're just replacing one drug for another, when it's really equivalent to sobriety and a huge leap forward.

D) Instead of 'former/reformed addict,' say 'not using substances' or 'person in long term recovery.'

Reasons to use person first language:

- The change shows that a person "has" a problem, rather than "is" the problem.
- The terms avoid elicit negative associations, punitive attitudes, and individual blame.

Some people will think the terms should elicit negative associations and punitive attitudes and individual blame so that they are pressured to stop, but it DOESN'T work like that.

The person using substances ALREADY feels pressure and drive to stop, but lack of community and support makes it difficult to stop, and the more you use this type of language, the more it reinforces the insurmountable identifier that you ARE your addiction and there's NO way out.

Other Examples:

AVOID USING LANGUAGE LIKE ASKING SOMONE IF THEY ARE 'CLEAN' OR had a 'DIRTY' test result.

These terms decrease self-esteem and effectiveness of treatment and have no relationship or correlation with actual cleanliness.

- Instead of, 'You've been clean for 6 months,' SAY: 'You haven't taken any substances in 6 months'
- 'Substance use affects Canadians from all walks of life' SAY 'Canadians from all walks of life are impacted by the use of substances' it's like French, even the sequence of word placement can make all the difference. But I promise this won't be as hard to learn as French.
- Instead of, 'I can smell alcohol on them. They're in our wait room all the time. They'll probably feel fine soon,' don't place alcoholism or withdrawal as a less worthy reason for a medical visit and instead say: 'The person may have been using substances. They deserve a full medical treatment.'
- Those who have experienced withdrawal will know this, but just because you are sick because you're dependent on a drug does not make the symptoms any less valid.



Now, let's talk about when you're CONFRONTED WITH STIGMA:

You hear: "When I see those addicts downtown, I can't imagine why they don't do something about their lives. You'd think they'd show a little self-respect; it's disgusting how they choose to live."

What someone suggested to me was to imagine a child in front of me who had done their very best. Then ask myself what problems they must have encountered as they grew up, and be dealing with today, to be suffering so much. Once I started doing that, it struck me that they must be leading a life they never imagined. I wonder if there is something we can do to help? At the very least, we can offer our respect for their humanity and use person-first language."

"I.E we never had a childhood or a chance to grow with love and support"

"I didn't choose to be homeless. I did the best I could. Circumstances led me to this"

We stigmatize in 300 milliseconds. We need to undo that automatic action.