

# CHANGING HOW WE TALK ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE\*

The language we use has a direct and profound impact on those around us. The negative impacts of stigma can be reduced by changing the language we use about substance use.

## TWO KEY PRINCIPLES INCLUDE:

- Using neutral, medically accurate terminology when describing substance use
- Using “people-first” language, that focuses first on the individual or individuals, not the action (e.g. “people who use drugs”)

It is also important to make sure that the language we use to talk about substance use is respectful and compassionate.

TOPIC	INSTEAD OF	USE
People who use drugs	Addicts Junkies Users Drug abusers Recreational drug user	People who use drugs People with a substance use disorder People with lived/living experience People who occasionally use drugs
People who have used drugs	Former drug addict Referring to a person as being “clean”	People who have used drugs People with lived/living experience People in recovery
Drug use	Substance/drug abuse Substance/drug misuse	Substance/drug use Substance use disorder/opioid use disorder Problematic [drug] use [Drug] dependence

\*This document was created in discussion with people with lived and living experience, through existing research and documentation from other organizations trying to address stigma. This is not an exhaustive list. Furthermore, as a result of the evolving discussion around the best language to use to accurately discuss substance use, this list will likely be revised.

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