



WHAT YOU SAY MATTERS MORE THAN YOU THINK

Understanding substance use disorder - and how everyday language helps or harms.

WORDS TRAVEL FARTHER THAN WE THINK

A joke in a waiting room. A comment at a family dinner. A word tossed around on TV. For someone living with a substance use disorder, overhearing words like these is often enough to keep them silent. Research shows that negative stereotypes repeated in everyday conversations and the media can keep people from seeking help or telling anyone what they're going through. ¹

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a chronic, treatable health condition. It's not a moral failing or caused by lack of willpower. Yet research shows that healthcare providers express more stigma toward patients with SUD than toward those with other chronic health conditions, like diabetes or depression. ²

The words we use matter. Terms like "addict" and "abuser" reinforce stigma and negative attitudes toward people who use drugs. These attitudes can affect the quality of care they receive and are associated with poorer outcomes. ³ Every interaction is an opportunity to change the conversation.

WHAT STIGMA DOES

In a survey of adults with SUD ⁴

49.6% Didn't tell their healthcare providers about their substance use

36.1% Avoided medical care they needed

30% Almost stopped treatment they had already started

WHAT ACCEPTANCE DOES

When people are treated without judgment, they come back. For example, in a 2025 survey of Washington State syringe services program (SSP) participants, many said supportive, respectful interactions with staff were one of the most valuable parts of the program. For many, SSPs were the only place they weren't judged, and that sense of acceptance made them more willing to return and seek additional supports, including treatment. ⁵

Connection is not a soft extra; it's the doorway to care.

SO WHAT DO I DO?

- **Ask, don't assume.** You can't tell who is struggling by looking. Let people define their own experience.
- **Keep asking.** One conversation rarely changes a life. Staying present does.
- **Let them tell you.** Listening without correcting or diagnosing is what makes disclosure safe. ⁶



SAY THIS	INSTEAD OF
Person with a substance use disorder	Addict, abuser, junkie
Substance use	Substance/drug abuse, habit
Testing positive / testing negative	Dirty / clean test
Person who uses drugs	User, drug user
Person experiencing homelessness who uses drugs	Junkie, transient

Person-first language guidance adapted from the CCSA/CAPSA primer ³ and Sundaram et al. ⁶

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE NEEDS SUPPORT

- **Washington Recovery Help Line:** 1-866-789-1511 (24/7, confidential) – waRecoveryHelpLine.org
- **SAMHSA National Helpline:** 1-800-662-4357 (24/7) – FindTreatment.gov

Asking for help is a strength, and treatment works. **The door opens from your side. What you say next matters more than you think.**



Learn more — visit the campaign on the ADAI website.
adai.uw.edu/what-you-say-matters/



Watch and share our short animation, "The Same Door."
youtube.com/watch?v=eqk7qZi37v0



Download and share this factsheet.

SOURCES

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