

Cooper Center for Healing Substance Use Disorder Language Guide

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and SUD-related medical conditions are highly stigmatized. Let's work together to shift the paradigm.

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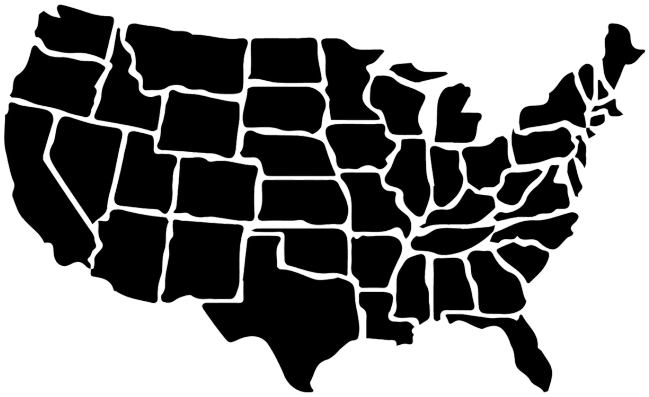
Content dedicated to all people in all stages of recovery and healing, and to all people who are working to end overdose and save lives

For Interdisciplinary Clinical Teams
Updated as of January 2023

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1 Introduction



What is Substance Use Disorder (SUD)?

A: Substance Use Disorder, abbreviated as SUD, is a complex medical condition in which there is use of a substance such as illicit drugs or alcohol despite harmful consequences and when an individual's ability to function in their daily living is impaired. Many individuals with SUD experience issues with multiple substances (known as Polysubstance Use Disorder). In 2019, more than 20 million adults in the United States were diagnosed with SUD during the past year.***(1)*** Thankfully, excellent evidence-based treatment options are available.



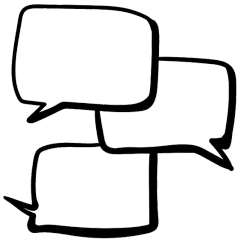
What is stigma?

A: Stigma consists of negative attitudes towards a group of people, thus creating an environment where individuals struggling with medical conditions such as SUD, mental illness, etc. are unfairly isolated, feared, and disgraced. These negative attitudes are shaped by societal stereotypes and discrimination.

2 Substance Use Disorder Language Overview

SUD Language: What to Know

SUD language influences perceptions of individuals struggling with SUD and SUD-related medical conditions, and may affect public policies and funding for and access to evidence-based treatment.



Case Study

Research has proven that terms such as "substance abuser" elicit bias in health care settings, and that stigma towards individuals struggling with SUD exists among providers and clinicians.

During the National Drug Policy Reform Conference at the White House in 2013,*(2)* a study was presented wherein a vignette was assigned at random to more than 500 behavioral health and SUD clinicians describing an individual experiencing legal issues due to alcohol and drug usage. In one part of the vignette, the individual was described as "substance abuser" and in the other part described as "having a substance use disorder." Clinicians assigned to the term "substance abuser" more harshly judged the individual than clinicians assigned to the term "having a substance use disorder."*(3)*

3 Stigmatizing Language: Harm Reductionist Dialects

Language pertaining to substance use and SUD matters and can appropriately change. Person-first language empowers individuals by putting the individual first and one aspect of their personhood second. Being cognizant of stigmatizing language to avoid, and intersectional language to consider, can help reduce stigma and harm towards individuals experiencing substance use and SUD.



STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE TO AVOID	VS	INTERSECTIONAL LANGUAGE TO CONSIDER
Substance Abuser; Addict; User; Junkie; Crack Head; Dope Fiend		Person Who Uses Drugs; Person with Substance Use Disorder
Clean Dirty		Abstinent from Substance Use Using Substances
Clean Urine Drug Test Dirty Urine Drug Test		Tested Negative for Substance Use Tested Positive for Substance Use
Clean Needles Dirty Needles		Unused Syringes Used Syringes
Addicted Babies; Crack Babies		Neonatal Withdrawal Syndrome Baby with Prenatal Exposure
Criminal; Convict; Felon Has a Record		Person Experiencing Incarceration Person Recently Released from Incarceration

4 Substance Use Disorder: Important Clinical Definitions

	DEFINED
Substance Use; Drug Use	Single or limited consumption of a substance
Substance Dependence Alcohol Dependence	The development of tolerance and then withdrawal from a substance(s) and/or alcohol
Addiction	Uncontrollable drug and/or alcohol seeking and use, while experiencing negative consequences
Substance Withdrawal Alcohol Withdrawal	The physical and emotional effects when an individual stops or reduces their intake of a compound(s)
Lapse	When an individual experiences a "slip" and uses substance(s) or drinks alcohol—but stops quickly afterward
Relapse	Full-blown return to a pattern of behavior that an individual has been trying to moderate or stop
Medication for Addiction Treatment (MAT)	Evidence-based addiction treatment with FDA-approved medically monitored medications



References

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. 2020.
2. Kelly J. F., Wakeman S. E., Saitz R. Stop Talking 'Dirty': Clinicians, Language, and Quality of Care for the Leading Cause of Preventable Death in the United States. *The American Journal of Medicine,* 128(1), 8-9. 2015.
3. Kelly J. F., Westerhoff, C. M. Does it Matter How We Refer to Individuals with Substance-Related Conditions? A Randomized Study of Two Commonly Used Terms. *International Journal of Drug Policy,* 21(3), 202-207. 2010.

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