

# The Words We Use Matter: Reducing Stigma through Language

**The stigma of addiction.** People who struggle with addiction face a wide range of stigmas. A stigma is a mark of disgrace that sets a person or a group apart. When people are labeled primarily because of their addiction, they are being negatively stereotyped.

Biased, hurtful words, attitudes and behavior represent prejudices against people with substance use disorder, and often lead to their discrimination and exclusion. Stigmas can also create physical and mental barriers for people with addiction to seek treatment.

## Why does language matter?

Ending stigma benefits everyone. The stigma of drug misuse keeps people from seeking treatment. Words like “junkie,” “addict” and “druggie” can hurt, damaging self-image and standing in the way of recovery. Addiction is not a choice. It’s a chronic disease similar to diabetes, heart disease, or arthritis.

*Choosing the words we use more carefully is one important way to make a difference and help decrease the stigma.*

Terms to Avoid	Why	Preferred Terminology
<b>Addict, Abuser, Junkie, User</b>	These terms are demeaning because they label a person solely by his/her illness or behavior and imply a permanency to the condition	Person with a substance use disorder
<b>Clean or Dirty</b>	These words associate symptoms (i.e. positive drug tests) with judgement statements about cleanliness.	Negative, positive, abstinent, substance-free, actively using
<b>Habit or Drug Habit</b>	These terms deny the medical nature of the condition and imply that resolution of the problem is simply a matter of willpower in being able to stop the habitual behavior	Substance use disorder, regular substance use
<b>Opioid Replacement or Methadone Maintenance</b>	These words imply that treatment medications are equal to street drugs and suggests a lateral move from illegal to legal addiction	Medication-assisted treatment, medication-assisted recovery

# What can we do to end stigma?

It's important to understand that opioid addiction is a treatable disease. On a personal level, we can look honestly at ourselves for signs of our own stigmas – negative, biased feelings, words or behaviors. We can make the effort to look at addiction from a different and hopefully more positive perspective.

We are all affected by addiction. Many people know someone who struggles with addiction, or who is in treatment or recovery.

- Each of us can commit to not using hurtful or damaging words about those who face addiction.
- We can all be part of the solution.
- We can take a stand against stigma.
- We can support treatment opportunities.
- We can encourage people in recovery.
- Most importantly, we can talk about addiction amongst our friends and family members to hopefully address the misperceptions about addiction, treatment options and long-term recovery.

**Concerned  
about  
yourself or  
someone  
else?**

The Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline provides free and confidential information and referrals for alcohol and drug abuse problems and related concerns.

Services are available Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm and on Saturday and Sunday from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Language interpreters are available.

**800-327-5050 | [www.helpline-online.com](http://www.helpline-online.com)**



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*Regional Substance Abuse Council*

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