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LANGUAGE MATTERS

MENTAL HEALTH
SUPPORTIVE
RESPECT
INCLUSIVE
INFORM
STOP STIGMA
STIGMA
LISTEN
RECOVERY

An Anti-Stigma Guide for utilizing language in relation to substance use, mental health, sexuality, and sexual health.

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Peer Programs Placement Students

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Language Matters: An Anti-Stigma Guide for utilizing language in relation to substance use, mental health, sexuality, and sexual health was developed as a part of a field placement to provide access and knowledge to those within the Peterborough community and beyond.

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A Different Approach

SUAP Peer Support Program

INTRODUCTION

The words and language that we use to discuss people and sensitive subjects in our lives can have a powerful impact on our conversations and relationships. This impact can extend to the people who access our services as well as those in our personal life. Research shows that the words used to describe someone can negatively influence our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward them including the decisions that we make involving their care as social service providers. This stigma creates a barrier for those who are seeking support.

By being cognizant of our language choices, we can avoid utilizing words or expressions that can ostracize groups of people or that are considered harmful toward distinct communities.

Substance use, mental health, sexuality, and sexual health can be challenging subjects to talk about. It is important that the diverse populations who access our services feel safe and comfortable when having these discussions. Our understanding of strength-based and inclusive language continuously evolves as societal views change and communities choose to reclaim stigmatized language. It is important to note that the determination of what language is strength-based and inclusive about a particular group must be determined by that group itself.

WHAT IS STIGMA?

There are many different types of stigma, including self-stigma, public stigma, professional stigma, and institutional stigma.

Self Stigma.

Refers to the negative attitudes of an individual toward their own diagnosis or condition and is also referred to as internalized stigma. Self-stigma has been related to outcomes, such as failure to access treatment and disempowerment.

Public Stigma.

Refers to negative attitudes towards those with a specific diagnosis or condition held by the general public. It is often based on misconceptions, fear, and prejudice. Research has demonstrated the significant impact of public stigmas such as discrimination in workplaces and public agencies.

Professional Stigma.

Refers to when healthcare professionals hold stigmatizing attitudes toward their patients, which are often based on fear or misunderstandings, or when professionals themselves experience stigma from the public or other healthcare professionals because of their work and connection with stigmatized individuals. Professional stigma is of particular concern as it may affect the care and treatment a person receives.

Institutional Stigma.

Refers to an organization's policies or culture of negative attitudes and beliefs toward stigmatized individuals. Such stigma can be reinforced by legal frameworks, public policy, and professional practices, thereby becoming deeply embedded in society.

DEFINITIONS

1. What is stigmatizing language?

Stigmatizing language assigns negative labels, stereotypes, and judgments to certain groups of people. Such language can contribute to negative outcomes such as social isolation, reduced self-esteem, and decreased likelihood to seek medical care or support.

2. What is person-first language?

Person-first language places emphasis on people rather than their diagnosis or condition. By utilizing this approach, an individual is no longer defined by their condition, which helps to eliminate stereotypes and biases.

3. How can we change the language in society?

This guide is a reference of words and phrases to avoid and what to use instead. With a unified language, we can help reshape the landscape and end the negative stereotypes and stigma of addiction and mental health. By doing so, we can remove barriers that continue to hold back too many people from the treatment or support they need or want.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

1. WORDS MATTER

Certain words can make people or groups feel excluded, and can convey stereotypes, expectations or limitations based on a person's identity. Stigmatizing language can make people feel unwelcome or unsafe in our service settings.

2. LANGUAGE CHANGES

As societal values change over time, so does the language that is considered acceptable. Nuances can be challenging to understand and navigate, but every effort should be made to be specific and use appropriate words when having conversations about substance use, mental health, and sexuality.

3. MINDSET MATTERS

Be open and empathetic, and encourage others to do the same. It is important that we do not let the fear of using the 'wrong' word keep important conversations from taking place. If someone suggests a correction to our language, it is important not to be insulted or defensive. Rather, try and understand the need for the suggested change, and take it as an opportunity to learn, increase understanding, and show empathy.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

4. PERSON FIRST

Use 'person first' language: language that prioritizes someone's identity and individuality above whatever other characteristic you might be describing (e.g., 'person living with a substance dependency' rather than 'addict'). This approach is consistent with delivering more person-centred care.

5. BE INCLUSIVE

Try to use language that is as inclusive as possible to reflect the diversity of the world. For example, instead of using the term 'substance abuse', use the term 'addiction' or 'substance misuse'. Similarly, when referring to a group of people, try 'folks' instead of 'guys' to avoid gender bias.

6. BE CRITICAL

Before introducing or describing someone based on personal characteristics (such as race, gender identity, (dis)ability, use of substances, etc.), ask yourself whether it is relevant and necessary to do so. Similarly, think about your intentions for using a phrase or word, and whether there is a more inclusive or respectful way to state what you are trying to say.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE

7. BE SPECIFIC

Use language that is consistent with how a person identifies and is comfortable for them. This would include, for example, using the terms a person is comfortable with to describe their condition, experience, or identity. It's important to keep in mind that not every member of a group, or person impacted by an issue, will agree on preferred terminology or identifiers. When describing their own identity, people might even use language that you would typically avoid using. The best way to find out what language someone is comfortable with, is to ask them.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Focus on substance use		
Addict Junkie Druggie Dopehead Doper Drunkard Tweaker Fiend Drug user Alcoholic Drug abuser Drunk Crackhead Methhead User Injector Bartard Poudré Poteux	Person with a substance use disorder Person with alcohol use disorder Person who consumes substances Person in active use Person who misuses substances/alcohol Person with harmful/hazardous/unhealthy substance use Person struggling with their use Person who uses prescriptions not prescribed to them Person who is dependent on substances Person who uses substances through intravenous/intramuscular injection Service user Person with lived experience of substance use Peer	These terms can be interpreted as the belief that the use of substances or addiction itself represents a failure of morals, personality, and willpower. This demonstrates a lack of attention to the complex physiological, psychological, and sociocultural factors that can underlie substance use and addiction and place blame on the person who is using substances. Overall, these terms characterize and label people according to an illness or action, rather than putting their individuality first, which is dehumanizing.
Clean	Sober Maintain(ing) recovery Tested/testing negative Negative drug test Abstinent Substance free In treatment Person is no longer/not actively consuming a substance New or unused equipment (such as harm reduction supplies)	This reinforces the negative social and moral judgments attached to substance use and sexuality. Use of such terms may evoke negative and punitive implicit cognitions.
Dirty	Tested/testing positive Positive drug test Person currently using substances Person with substances in their urine or blood	This reinforces the negative social and moral judgments attached to substance use and sexuality. Use of such terms may evoke negative and punitive implicit cognitions.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength–based alternative	Explanation
Focus on substance use		
Binge user Binge drinker	Person who engages in heavy/large episodic use/drinking	These terms can be interpreted as the belief that the amount of substances consumed represents a failure of morals, personality, and willpower. These terms characterize and label people according to an action, rather than putting their individuality first.
Strung out Hammered High as a kite Hopped up Loaded	Intoxicated Under the influence Inebriated	These terms can be interpreted as the belief that the amount of substances consumed represents a failure of morals, personality, and willpower. These terms characterize and label people according to an action, rather than putting their individuality first.
Relapse Lapse Slip Off the wagon	Resumed substance use Recurrence of previous substance use	These words may still be commonly used by people who use substances and those working with them. It is important to allow people to use the words that they feel best describe their own experience. However, the terms can imply a failure on the person and should be used with caution.
Drug	Substance Specify what substance is being referred to	This term has a moral connotation that can be perceived as stigmatizing.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Focus on substance use		
Illicit Street Black market	Illegal substances Illegally obtained substances	'Illicit' has a moral connotation that can be perceived as stigmatizing. 'Illegal' is a more accurate, plain language term that may come across as less judgmental. 'Black' is often used as an adjective to convey that something is illegal or otherwise 'bad' (e.g., black market, black sheep, etc.), which has clear racist underpinnings.
Addict baby Addicted baby Drug baby	Baby with symptoms/signs of prenatal substance exposure Baby experiencing withdrawal Baby who has been exposed to substances Baby born to a mother who consumed substances while pregnant	Babies cannot be born with an addiction as addiction is a behavioral disorder. They are simply born experiencing a withdrawal syndrome. These terms place moral judgment on the mother and focuses on the deficits rather than the person.
Detox	Withdrawal management	'Detox' gives the impression that a person needs to be cleansed from their substance use.
Patient Client	Person with lived experience Service user Individual(s) that we serve Peer(s)	These terms imply that the person is in need of help due to their apparent shortcomings, while the service provider holds all of the knowledge and power in the relationship. This does not allow space for a strength-based approach or recognition that the person is the expert in their life.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Focus on mental health		
Person suffers from Victim Suffering from Mentally ill Mental patient	Person lives with _____ Person is experiencing _____ Person being treated for _____ Person living with mental health challenges Person diagnosed with _____ Mental health crisis Metal health challenge(s)	These terms suggest a lack of quality of life for those with mental illness.
Non-compliant Resistant Unmotivated	Person does not agree with tx plan Person has opted to not do _____ Person has not begun _____ Person is not ready at this time to consider/pursue treatment option(s)	These terms perpetrate judgment and stigma for those attempting to access support.
Insane Crazy Lunatic Psycho Disturbed Hysteric/hysterical Schizo Deranged	Bothersome Annoying Frustrating Exhilarating Person living with mental health challenges Person living with trauma	These terms reinforce stigma, sensationalizes mental illness, and adds to people's misunderstanding of mental illnesses.
Schizophrenic Anorexic Bulimic	Person with a diagnosis of _____ Person receiving treatment for _____	These terms label the person by their mental illness first and does not allow space for other aspects of their identity.
Issue(s)	Challenge(s)	'Issue(s)' holds negative connotations that can be harmful.
Commit(ted) suicide	Completed suicide Died by suicide Lost to suicide	'Commit(ted)' is a term that when paired with the word suicide, has negative connotations and is still linked to criminal overtones.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Focus on mental health		
Failed suicide attempt	Attempted suicide Survived a suicide Non-fatal suicide attempt	'Failed' can imply that it was something meant to be completed, and it was due to a shortcoming in the person why it was not completed.
Happy pills	Specify the medication	Colloquialisms about treatment can undermine people's willingness to seek support.
Shrink	Psychiatrist Psychologist Mental health practitioner Specify the professional	Colloquialisms about treatment can undermine people's willingness to seek support.
Mental institution Asylum	Mental health hospital	Colloquialisms about treatment can undermine people's willingness to seek support.
Asperger's	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Asperger's was named after a doctor who played a critical role in identifying children with disabilities and sending dozens to Spiegelgrund, a children's ward in Vienna where adolescents were euthanized or subjected to experimentation. In 2013 it become part of the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.
Low/high functioning	Specify the supports that the individual requires to be successful.	The false dichotomy between high functioning and low functioning is harmful to those with disabilities. These terms are used to disregard a person's intelligence or agency. This can only serve to further internalize ableism that people are forced to endure

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Focus on sexuality		
Fag Homo Homosexual	Use wichever term the person prefers. Gay Lesbian Queer Bisexual Pansexual	Historically, the word 'homosexual' has been used in a clinical context and adopted by anti-LGBTQ+ movements to suggest that people who are attracted to people of the same sex are somehow diseased or psychologically and emotionally disordered.
Sexual preference Sexual lifestyle	Sexual orientation	These terms convey the message that same sex attraction is a choice and could/ should therefore be 'cured'.
Promiscuous	Person with multiple partners	This term negatively describes someone who has had multiple sexual partners and promotes the cultural view that women are not to engage in sexual activity and they are 'lesser' is they do.
Risky sex Unsafe sex	Sexual contact	These terms can inappropriately attribute risk solely to an individual's decisions and actions without acknowledging how the person's environment may be driving that risk. These terms also perpetuate stigma, bias, and undermine people's willingness to seek support.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength–based alternative	Explanation
Focus on sexuality and sexual health		
Normal	Use specific language for what you are referring to Penis in vagina sex Penis in anus sex Sex where the mouth on the vulva Sex where the mouth is on the penis	The word 'normal' can be othering and excluding to those outside the stated 'norm'.
Tranny Transvestite Transgendered	Transgender	Transgender is an adjective and not to be used as a noun, using the word in this way can come across as dehumanizing or implying that a person is inflicted by a condition.
Sex change Pre/Post op	Transition(ing) Gender affirming procedures	These terms fixate on surgery and a person's anatomy. Many transgender people do not or cannot undergo surgery as a part of their transition for a variety of reasons. A more inclusive term encompasses social, surgical, or other medical means of transition.
Prostitute Street whore	Sex worker	These words have a historically negative connotation and disregard sex work as a valid form of employment.
Infected (with STI/STD) STI/STD positive	Person living with _____ Person was exposed to _____ Person diagnosed with _____ Person experiencing _____	This reinforce the negative social and moral judgments attached to sexuality and substance use. Use of such terms may evoke negative and punitive implicit cognitions.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Other terms to be mindful of		
Wife Husband Boyfriend Girlfriend	Spouse Partner	These terms do not allow one to be more inclusive for those who are non-binary or use alternative labels. These terms, when used without enough information about the person you are referring to, can assert an incorrect assumption.
Mother Father	Parent(s) Guardians(s)	These terms are more inclusive for those with poor parental relationships and/or those not living with their biological parents. These terms, when used without enough information about the person you are referring to, can assert an incorrect assumption.
Convict Inmate Offender Felon Prisoner Parolee Ex-convict	Person who has been incarcerated Person with a felony conviction Person convicted of (alleged) offense Person on parole/probation Person with legal involvement	These terms characterize and label people according to past or present convictions or status in the legal system. This reduces their identity to violations they have been accused or convicted of rather than putting their individuality first.
Alien Illegal immigrant	Refugee Immigrant Newcomer Person without documentation	These words criminalize the person, rather than the act of unlawfully entering or remaining in a country. In addition, 'alien' has a particularly dehumanizing connotation. These terms are also frequently used to insult those who have entered and/or reside in the country legally.

Terms to avoid or to use with caution	Strength-based alternative	Explanation
Other terms to be mindful of		
Native Indian	Indigenous	These terms are outdated and hold negative and racist connotations.
Elderly Aged Old person/people	Older adults	These terms can imply a stereotype and caution is advised when using it to refer to an individual. Note: an Indigenous Elder is considered an honored title, this alternative is not to be applied.
Homeless Street person Vagrant Derelict	Person with insecure housing Person without housing	These terms have derogatory connotations. It implies that one is or has less than another. They imply the moral assumption that everyone should be housed and it is their fault if they are not. 'Home' is an abstract idea, a state of mind, and not necessarily a housing structure. A person can have a home without a house, so the language should reflect that.

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