

Recovery-Supportive Language & Communication Guide

This guide provides language recommendations that support a respectful, inclusive, and recovery-centered environment within the Collegiate Recovery Program and broader WVU community. Language plays a critical role in shaping attitudes, reducing stigma, and influencing whether individuals feel safe seeking support.

Recovery language is not about being perfect, instead it is about creating spaces where people feel respected, safe, and empowered to define their own identity and path in recovery!



Recovery is Self Directed!

This means:

- A person in recovery defines their own recovery goals
- They choose their language of identity/self-expression
- Providers and staff serve as supporters, not definers!
- There is no single “correct” or “right” recovery pathway

This aligns the CRP community with culturally responsive and trauma-informed practice, recognizing that autonomy and voice are most central to healing!

Why does language matter in recovery?

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are chronic but treatable health conditions, yet stigma remains one of the greatest barriers to care and recovery engagement.

National data show that SUDs affect millions of individuals annually, but many do not seek treatment due to fear of judgment or discrimination (SAMHSA, 2026).

Stigma is reinforced through language that frames substance use as moral failure rather than a medical condition. Research shows that stigmatizing terms (e.g., “addict,” “abuser”) increase negative feelings and reduce perceptions of treatment effectiveness, even among professionals. In contrast, medically accurate language such as “substance use disorder” promotes more therapeutic, compassionate responses.

Why does language matter in recovery?

Research consistently shows that language influences how individuals with substance use and mental health conditions are perceived and treated.

- Terms like “substance abuser” increase blame and judgmental attitudes, while “substance use disorder” promotes more therapeutic responses
- Stigmatizing language can reduce help seeking and engagement in one’s recovery
- Person-first, clinically accurate language improves perceptions of care and respect

Guidance from National Institute on Drug Abuse and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration emphasizes that reducing stigma through language is a major component of effective recovery support.

What is recovery-supportive language?

Recovery supportive language is communication that:

- Uses person-first terminology
- Is non-judgmental and respectful
- Emphasizes strengths, resilience, and growth
- Recognizes multiple pathways to recovery
- Is culturally humble and inclusive
- Avoids language that implies blame, moral failure, or permanence

At its core, recovery supportive language recognizes that individuals are more than their diagnosis or experiences!

Person-First, Strengths-Based, & Choice-Oriented Language

We always want to prioritize language that recognizes the whole person, not just the diagnosis.

Instead of focusing on “what not to say,” this guide emphasizes:

- Strengths over deficits
- Growth over labels
- Humanity over diagnosis

Examples of empowering language:

- “Person in recovery” instead of “addict”
- “Person experiencing substance use challenges”
- “Student navigating recovery”
- “Person with a substance use disorder (SUD)”

Person-First, Strengths-Based, & Choice-Oriented Language

Research from NIDAMED (2021) and SAMHSA (2026) supports person-first language as a way to reduce stigma and improve engagement in care.

However, lived experience research reminds us that language is not universal. Some individuals may prefer identity-based terms (e.g., “addict” within 12-step recovery communities). Therefore:

Best practice: **Ask, don't assume.**

Language should always be guided by the individual's preference and personal recovery pathway (Gazzola et al., 2023).

Emphasize Strengths and Recovery!

Recovery is an ongoing, individualized process.

- Focus on progress, goals, and growth
- Highlight resilience and capabilities
- Avoid deficit-based or hopeless framing

Using strengths-based language aligns with core ethical values and supports feelings of empowerment.

Cultural & Inclusive Recovery

It is also important to consider how recovery occurs within broader social, cultural, and systemic contexts.

As highlighted in research from the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal and NAADAC:

- Culture, identity, and lived experience shape recovery
- Individuals may face compounded stigma (race, gender, sexuality, etc.)
- Language must reflect cultural humility and inclusivity

Recovery-supportive communication should continue to:

- Respect diverse identities and experiences
- Avoid stereotypes or assumptions
- Be mindful of structural barriers and inequities

Recommended Language Shifts:

The next time you're looking for the right language to discuss SUDs, try using this chart, inspired by the National Institute on Drug Abuse!

Instead of...	Use...
Addict, user, substance or drug abuser, or junkie	Person with a substance use disorder (SUD), person with an opioid use disorder (OUD), or person with opioid addiction
Alcoholic or drunk (noun)	Person with alcohol use disorder (AUD) or person who misuses alcohol or engages in unhealthy/hazardous alcohol use
Former or reformed addict	Person in recovery or person who previously used drugs
Dirty, failing a drug test	Testing positive (on a drug screen)
Habit	SUD or drug addiction
Abuse	Use (for illicit drugs) or misuse (for prescription medications used other than as prescribed)
Clean	Being in remission or recovery, abstinent from drugs, not drinking or taking drugs, or testing negative (on a drug screen)
Addicted baby	Baby born to a parent who used drugs while pregnant, baby with signs of withdrawal from prenatal drug exposure, newborn exposed to substances, or baby with neonatal abstinence syndrome

Tips & Helpful Resources

- **Language shapes perception** –different words carry different meanings and emotional weight, so person-first language helps center humanity and reduce stigma.

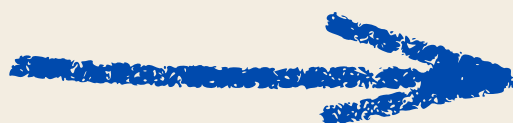
Link: [Words Matter: Terms to Use and Avoid When Talking About Addiction](#)

- **Stigma can impact recovery outcomes** - stigmatizing language can reduce help-seeking and worsen health disparities, while supportive language can improve engagement and trust.

Link: [Stigmatizing Attitudes Towards Substance Use Disorders in a College Setting](#)

- **Learn recovery language from lived experience** - language in recovery is not universal, but it is shaped by culture, identity, and recovery communities. Always remain open to individual preference!

Link: [People in Treatment May Prefer Medically Accurate, Person-First Language, But Its Always Good to Ask](#)



WVU COLLEGIATE RECOVERY PROGRAM

**You're not
behind— you're
unfolding!**

**BE PATIENT AND GIVE YOURSELF GRACE
AS YOU LEARN AND INCORPORATE
RECOVERY-SUPPORTIVE LANGUAGE INTO
YOUR LIFE!**

Links to all Resources:

- <https://www.recoveryanswers.org/research-post/people-treatment-prefer-medically-accurate-person-first-language-good-to-ask/>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07448481.2025.2461612#abstract>
- <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt56287/2024-nsduh-annual-national-report.pdf>
- <https://magazine.medlineplus.gov/article/a-better-way-to-say-that-stigmatizing-language-affects-how-we-treat-addiction>
- https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/aa&r_winter2021_cultural_considerations_in_addiction_treatment.pdf
- <https://nida.nih.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/health-professions-education/words-matter-terms-to-use-avoid-when-talking-about-addiction>
- <https://www.recoveryanswers.org/research-post/the-real-stigma-of-substance-use-disorders/>