

Recovery Supportive Language

WVU Collegiate Recovery strives to make a safe space for all Mountaineers looking to live a healthy, balanced life on campus and beyond. Whether we are partaking in wellness, adventure or simply fun activities, one way to make our journeys together more meaningful for everyone is to use language that is inclusive and sensitive to all experiences.

To get started on this learning path, check out and share the information below. Also, do not be afraid to ask about things you do not understand! One of the best ways to thrive in recovery and as an ally is to have a willingness to learn.

Why does language matter?

Something as simple as language may initially seem unimportant when starting and supporting journeys in recovery. However, the link between language and the perceived notion of oneself and others [has been proven](#) to affect a variety of important aspects surrounding recovery. Whether it is one's own feelings of hope and self-determination for change, or the public's perception of "choice" versus "disorder," or the ability to receive proper medical attention and support, language can make all the difference (see ["Stop Talking 'Dirty'"](#) by Kelly et al). That is why everyone should take the first step of recognizing one's humanity in language, so we can thrive together.

Language Matters

Language is powerful – especially when talking about addictions.
Stigmatizing language perpetuates negative perceptions.

“Person first” language focuses on the person, not the disorder.

When Discussing Addictions...

SAY THIS

NOT THAT

Person with a substance use disorder

Person living in recovery

Person living with an addiction

Person arrested for drug violation

Chooses not to at this point

Medication is a treatment tool

Had a setback

Maintained recovery

Positive drug screen

Addict, junkie, druggie

Ex-addict

Battling/suffering from an addiction

Drug offender

Non-compliant/bombed out

Medication is a crutch

Relapsed

Stayed clean

Dirty drug screen



Tips and helpful links:

1. Phrasing can make all the difference. If you are curious why language is so important, consider the connotations associated with different words. Largely due to the influence of the media, the word “addict” can bring about negative connotations, erasing the humanity behind the label. On the other hand, “person with a substance use disorder” puts the individual first, and refrains from defining them as something other than themselves.

For a more in-depth explanation and researched example of how perception is changed with such phrasings, check out and share this article:

<https://slate.com/technology/2017/06/the-associated-press-removes-words-like-addict-and-drug-abuser.html>.

2. Stopping stigma towards those with a substance use disorder starts with language. Stigma towards those with a substance use disorder can interfere with their willingness to seek treatment, can cause others to feel pity, fear, anger, and a desire to distance themselves from those living with an addiction, and negatively influence health care providers when it comes to treatment.

For example, consider the stigma tied around the word “abuse.” This is a word that already exists with negative connotations, and when applied to someone with a substance use disorder, it evokes feelings of judgment and the idea of punishment. To break down this stigma, it is better to use words such as “use” for illicit drugs, and “misuse” or “used other than prescribed” for prescription drugs. Not only are these words more accurate, but they do not have the same negative feelings attached that can lead to discrimination.

For a more in-depth explanation of the stigmatization discussed above and ways to help combat it through language, visit

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/health-professions-education/words-matter-terms-to-use-avoid-when-talking-about-addiction>.

3. There are so many words you can learn. The amount of words and phrases used in the journey of recovery are numerous, and it is important to know what exactly they mean. Check out this dictionary that lists and breaks down the language used with substance use disorders, and share it with others: <https://www.recoveryanswers.org/addiction-ary/>.