

## **Language Matters: communicating about people, alcohol, and drugs**

The language used when speaking about or referring to people who use drugs, including alcohol, has a huge impact on how individuals view themselves and how others view them.

Words can be alienating, defining people solely by consumption of a substance, designating them as 'others'; inferior or morally flawed.

### **Why should we be mindful of language used?**

Language plays a significant role when speaking about or referring to people who use alcohol or drugs. Words can be alienating and can have a huge impact on how people view themselves and how others view them. As a result, people can become excluded from mainstream society. Societal and public stigma fuel self-stigma, making it harder for people to seek help and recover. Families are affected by stigma and language can also prejudice professionals.

### **What makes this important?**

Negative attitudes and stigma from society, from professionals within services, and self-stigmatisation, can be one of the biggest barriers to accessing treatment, community services and other activities. Stigma needs to be challenged across services and society ([Rights, Respect and Recovery, Scottish Government, 2018](#)).

### **How should we communicate?**

Drug and alcohol use can occur for a variety of complex reasons and is a health condition. We can all help by treating people with compassion and kindness, not judgement. The less people judge, the more chance those struggling will seek treatment and help to recover.

### **What difference will it make?**

Attitudes and behaviour can change. Challenging stigma benefits everyone in society, as it helps to build equality and tackle inequality. By reducing stigma people will feel a greater connection to society, more included and more likely to access treatment and support for recovery.

### **Specific Groups:**

Groups to be particularly mindful about:

- Women - Although overall men drink more than women, there is more stigma attached to women's drinking. Be mindful of this inequity when communicating.

- Babies - Babies born to mothers who are drug or alcohol dependant are not 'addicted'. They can experience neonatal withdrawal.
- LGBTQ+ individuals often face stigma and discrimination in many areas including family rejection, workplace discrimination and societal homophobia/transphobia. This can all lead to increased alcohol or drug use resulting in further stigma.

We encourage the use of 'people first' language; language that focuses first on the person, not the behaviour (e.g. people who use drugs). We do this as it reminds us to be compassionate and that we are talking about human beings. People with **Rights**, who deserve **Respect**, and should be supported in their **Recovery**.

### **Use of Imagery**

While language is significant, it is also important to be mindful of using non-stigmatising images when communicating. Images of alcohol and drugs should only be used where appropriate and images of people in vulnerable conditions are stigmatising. These images should always be avoided.

Articles about alcohol should not contain images which make drinking seem glamorous or appealing. Images should tell the human side of the story in a positive and responsible way. Photos of interview subjects, support services and/or the community featured in the report should be used instead.

Where Substance is referred to in the table below, this includes alcohol.

**Language matters**

**Language is powerful**—especially when discussing alcohol and other drugs and the people who use them. Stigmatising language reinforces negative stereotypes. “Person-centred” language focuses on the person, not their substance use.

**When working with people who use alcohol and other drugs...**

 <b>try this</b>	 <b>instead of this</b>
<b>substance use, non-prescribed use</b>	abuse   misuse   problem use   non-compliant use
<b>person who uses/injects drugs</b>	drug user/abuser
<b>person with a dependence on...</b>	addict   junkie   druggie   alcoholic
<b>person experiencing drug dependence</b>	suffering from addiction   has a drug habit
<b>person who has stopped using drugs</b>	clean   sober   drug-free
<b>person with lived experience of drug dependence</b>	ex-addict   former addict   used to be a...
<b>person disagrees</b>	lacks insight   in denial   resistant   unmotivated
<b>treatment has not been effective/ chooses not to</b>	not engaged   non-compliant
<b>person’s needs are not being met</b>	drug seeking   manipulative   splitting
<b>currently using drugs</b>	using again   fallen off the wagon   had a setback
<b>no longer using drugs</b>	stayed clean   maintained recovery
<b>positive/negative urine drug screen</b>	dirty/clean urine
<b>used/unused syringe</b>	dirty/clean needle   dirties
<b>pharmacotherapy is treatment</b>	replacing one drug for another

Adapted from Language Matters from the National Council for Behavioural Health, United States (2015) and Matua Raki, New Zealand (2016).



Language is fluid and changes over time. As a result of the evolving discussion around best language to use to discuss substance use, this document will be monitored and revised as necessary.

**Further sources of guidance:**

[Moving Beyond 'People-First' language: Scottish Drugs Forum](#)

[Reporting of Substance Media Toolkit: Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs](#)

Adapted from NHS Highland Language Matters Document.

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