

Language Matters to the American Medical Association

Research shows that the words we use to describe someone can influence attitudes, beliefs, and behavior toward them, including the care decisions physicians make.^{1,2}

Using respectful language in relation to substance use, mental health, sexual health, gender, race, age, and all aspects of patient care is important. Everyone experiences differently, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ensure the right word use in every situation, but some overarching considerations can help promote appropriate and respectful choices when speaking to or writing/speaking about patients. This is an essential component to reducing and removing individual and structural health inequities.

Conveying Respect

Words matter. Certain words can make people or groups feel excluded, can convey stereotypes, set expectations or impose limitations based on physical or other characteristics, and can make people feel unwelcome or unsafe, which can adversely affect the person's well-being. See the accompanying table for examples.

Words change. As societal values change over time, so does the language we consider acceptable. Nuances can be challenging to understand and navigate, but we should make every effort to choose words thoughtfully to ensure we are specific, clear, *and* respectful.

Mindset. Be open and empathetic; encourage others to do the same. Don't let the fear of using the 'wrong' word keep important conversations from occurring. If someone suggests a correction, try to understand why they have and take it as an opportunity to learn.

Person first. Use 'person first' language: language that prioritizes someone's individuality above whatever other characteristic you might be describing. For example, say, 'person with substance use disorder' rather than 'addict'.

Be inclusive. Try and use language that is as inclusive as possible to reflect the known or unknown diversity of your audience. For example, instead of using the terms husband or wife when unsure of the sexual orientation and/or marital status of those you are speaking with, use the term 'partner.'

Ask about preferences. Use language that is consistent with how a person identifies him/her/themselves and is comfortable for the individual, for example, use the pronouns they deem appropriate. The best way to find out how someone identifies or what language is comfortable to them is to ask.

1. Goddu AP, O'Connor KJ, Lanzkron S, Saheed MO, Saha S, Peek ME, Haywood C, and Beach MC. Do Words Matter? Stigmatizing Language and the Transmission of Bias in the Medical Record. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 2018; 33 (5): 685.
2. Kelly, J.F. and Westerhoff, C. Does it matter how we refer to individuals with substance-related problems? A randomized study with two commonly used terms. *Int J Drug Policy*. 2010; 21: 202–207

By changing the words used in conversation, negative stereotypes and health inequities can begin to be dismantled, one conversation at a time.

Instead of...	Use...
Addict User Substance or drug user/abuser Junkie	Person with substance/opioid use disorder Person with addiction Patient
Former addict Reformed addict	Person in recovery/remission
Relapse	Experienced a recurrence of symptoms
Drug problem Drug habit	Substance use disorder
Drug abuse	Drug misuse, harmful use
Compliant	Adherent
Clean drug test	Testing negative
Clean (non-toxicology related)	Being in recovery/remission Abstinent from drugs Not drinking or taking drugs
Dirty drug test	Testing positive
Dirty (non-toxicology related)	Person who uses drugs
Alcoholic Drunk	Unhealthy or harmful alcohol use Person with alcohol use disorder
Addicted Baby	Baby with signs of withdrawal from prenatal drug exposure Newborn exposed to substances
Mental patient Lunatic Psycho	Person living with/diagnosed with mental illness
Victim Suffering from Affected with	A person being treated for/with a mental illness
HIV-infected person	Person living with HIV
Mother-to-child transmission	Vertical transmission
Husband/Wife/Boyfriend/Girlfriend	Partner/Spouse
Risky sex, Unprotected sex, Promiscuous	Sexual contact Having multiple partners
Mother, Father	Parent, Guardian
Sex change	Transition
Convict, Ex-convict, Inmate, Felon	Person who has been incarcerated, Person with a felony conviction, Person on parole
You've been drinking a lot lately, why don't you just stop?	I notice you're drinking more than usual. Is there anything I can do to help you?
I have been clean for 3 months.	I have not taken any substances in 3 months.
Do you know what to do if you see an overdose?	Do you know how to help a person who has overdosed?