
Destigmatizing Health Care: Trauma-informed Language for Treating People Who Use Drugs

Stigma is a well-documented barrier for Native people seeking medical care.¹ Stigma is a negative or discriminatory attitude/belief providers might carry that can have significant and harmful effects on patients, eroding trust in the medical system and deterring individuals from seeking care.

As the result of discriminatory medical experiences resulting from stigma, this mistrust has become prevalent among people who use drugs (PWUD).² One way to start rebuilding this trust is by changing the way we talk about substance use and providing trauma-informed care.

Stigma³

The negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency. A stigma implies social disapproval and can lead unfairly to discrimination against and exclusion of the individual.

The Impact of Stigma

To better contextualize the role stigma plays in health care, it's important to examine the ways in which it manifests. Studies have found that PWUD associate hospitals with traumatic experiences and report feeling discriminated against by doctors.² For American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) who use drugs, this distrust is often compounded by historical and ongoing trauma that has led to distrust of the American medical system. Studies have also found that compared to other racial and ethnic groups, AI/ANs are the most likely to report discrimination in health care.⁴

Reducing Stigma through Language

Adjusting the vocabulary around substance use can be a form of harm reduction. Providers should recognize behavior as a product of socioeconomic factors, historical and ongoing trauma, and discrimination, and seek to address those factors holistically. While it might not be obvious, language can have significant unintentional effects on PWUD seeking medical care.



The following includes three key points to keep in mind when talking to and about people who use drugs:

EMPOWERMENT

Using positive, uplifting, and medically accurate terms while avoiding words with negative connotations such as risk, abuse, suffer, addiction, etc. that can contribute to stigma.




PEOPLE-FIRST/WHOLE PERSON

Emphasizing a person’s condition as something that a person has rather than who they are. This is opposed to “identity-first” language and conveys respect for the patient.

NON-COMBATIVE

Avoid negative phrases such as fight, war on drugs, battle, struggle, etc. These words can imply that substance misuse is a battle that can be won rather than a medical condition that can be treated.

SHIFTING LANGUAGE AROUND DRUG USE⁵⁻⁸

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| People who use drugs (PWUD), patient, person with opioid and/or substance use disorder, person who injects drugs (PWID) | Addict, user, junkie, drug abuser, dopehead, druggie | Rather than saying that the patient is the problem, emphasize that the patient has a problem |
| Person in recovery, person who previously used drugs | Former addict, recovering addict, former junkie/druggie/etc. | Reductionist language that labels a person by their struggles, can be stigmatizing |
| In recovery, not currently using drugs, testing negative for drug use, abstinent | Clean, sober | Words like “clean” can be stigmatizing and negative, use more clinically accurate language |
| Actively using, testing positive for drug use | Dirty, using, on drugs | The negative connotation around the word “dirty” is stigmatizing, clinically inaccurate and can discourage those seeking recovery |
| Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), medication for addiction treatment, medication, treatment | Replacement therapy, substitution therapy | Describing MOUD as merely a substitution implies that the patient is switching one drug for another, rather than recovering from drug misuse |
| Respond, program, address, manage, mitigate | Fight, counter, battle, struggle, combat drugs, war on drugs | Avoid combative, negative language that can be unintentionally discriminatory |
| Describe trends in purely analytical terms such as “increasing” or “decreasing” | Drug epidemic, scourge of drugs | Can be alarmist and misleading rather than contextual and informative |

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