

March 2021

QUICK REFERENCE

PSYCH HUB COMMUNICATION GUIDE

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE & IMAGERY
FOR MENTAL HEALTH CONTENT

PURPOSE

The language and imagery we use are powerful and shape how we see the world, others, and ourselves. The purpose of this document is to provide the most up-to-date information on how to communicate about mental health, substance use, and suicide in order to help people avoid unintentionally causing harm with stigmatizing language.

This Quick Reference document is an abbreviated version of the Psych Hub Communication Guide. To access the full version, including definitions, imagery recommendations, and recommendations regarding different populations and topics please visit PsychHub.com.

PERSON-CENTERED LANGUAGE RECOMMENDATIONS



Person-centered (or person-first) language should be the default when describing any individual.

NO

depressive (noun)

transgender (noun)

Black (noun)

YES

person with depression

transgender person / trans person

Black person / African American

WHY

Using person-centered language communicates that a person is not defined by any one trait or condition. It's important to avoid turning words that should be descriptors or qualifiers into nouns.

MENTAL HEALTH

NO

mental health problem

suffers from mental illness / struggles with mental health

using any disorder as a noun (e.g., schizophrenic, depressive, alcoholic, anorexic)

YES

mental health issue / mental health condition / mental illness

experiences mental illness / has a mental illness

person with schizophrenia / person with depression / person with alcohol use disorder / person with anorexia

WHY

“Problem” has a negative connotation and places judgment on another person’s experience.

“Suffer” may imply pity. This kind of language victimizes the individual.¹

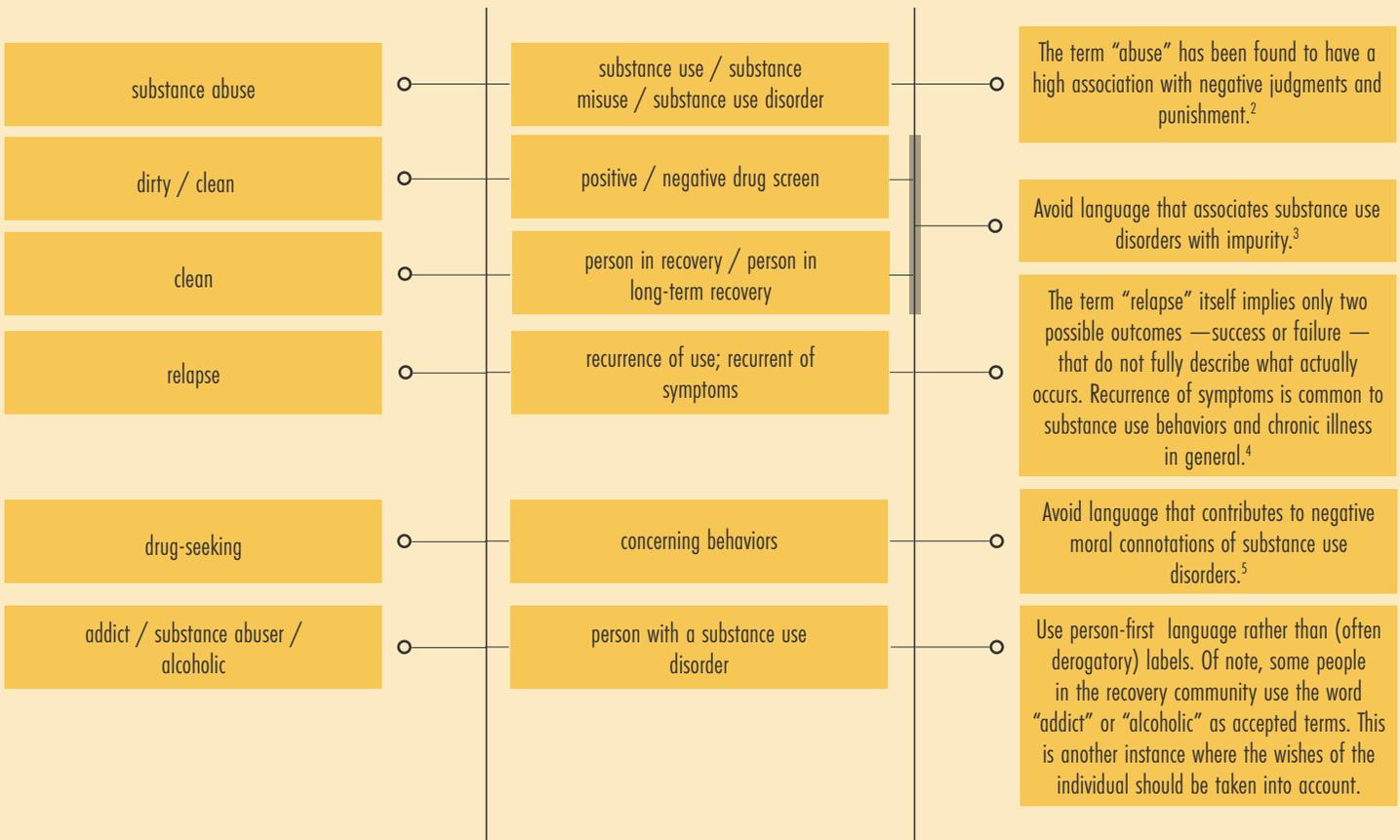
People are not their disorders or conditions. Using person-first language is vital.

SUBSTANCE USE

NO

YES

WHY



SUICIDE & SELF-HARM

NO

committed suicide

failed suicide /
unsuccessful suicide

successful suicide

epidemic

skyrocketing rates

died by firearm / died by hanging /
died by overdose

YES

died by suicide, died from suicide

attempted suicide / nonfatal
suicide attempt

died by suicide / death by suicide

public health issue

increasing rates

died by suicide, died from suicide

WHY

“Committed” frames suicide as a
criminal act.⁶

“Failed” and “unsuccessful”/“successful”
imply that suicide is a goal
or accomplishment.⁷

Avoid using language that sensationalizes
suicide or presents it as an
insurmountable issue.⁸

Depicting or describing the method of a
suicide death may lead to contagion.⁹

CITATIONS

- ¹Counseling Staff. (2019, October 16). *Inclusive language guide*. The Family Institute at Northwestern University. <https://counseling.northwestern.edu/blog/inclusive-language-guide/>
- ²Kelly, J. F., & Westerhoff, C. M. (2010). Does it matter how we refer to individuals with substance-related conditions? A randomized study of two commonly used terms. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 21(3), 202-207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2009.10.010>
- ³Ashford, R. D., Brown, A., & Curtis, B. (2019). Expanding language choices to reduce stigma: A Delphi study of positive and negative terms in substance use and recovery. *Health Education*, 119(1), 51-62. <https://doi.org/10.1108/he-03-2018-0017>
- ⁴Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2019). *Enhancing motivation for change in substance use disorder treatment: Treatment improvement protocol (TIP) series no. 35* (SAMHSA Publication No. PEP19-02-01-003). https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/tip35_final_508_compliant_-_02252020_0.pdf
- ⁵Copeland, D. (2020). Drug-seeking: A literature review (and an exemplar of stigmatization in nursing). *Nursing Inquiry*, 27(1), e12329. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12329>
- ⁶Beyond Blue. (n.d.). *Why you shouldn't say 'committed' suicide*. <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/personal-best/pillar/in-focus/why-you-shouldn-t-say-committed-suicide>
- ⁷Olson, R. (2011). *Suicide and language*. Centre for Suicide Prevention. <https://www.suicideinfo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/IE3.pdf>
- ⁸World Health Organization. (2017). *Preventing suicide: A resource for media professionals, update 2017* (WHO/MSD/MER/17.5). <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/258814/WHO-MSD-MER-17.5-eng.pdf?sequence=1>
- ⁹World Health Organization. (2017). *Preventing suicide: A resource for media professionals, update 2017* (WHO/MSD/MER/17.5). <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/258814/WHO-MSD-MER-17.5-eng.pdf?sequence=1>