

Person-First LANGUAGE GUIDE

Person who uses (or injects) drugs can be abbreviated PWUD or PWID

This can be used to describe any person who uses substances. Many people actively use substances (yes, even daily), and referring to non-problematic use as abuse implies a willful misconduct that has been shown to increase stigma and reduce quality of care.

Substance use disorder

This term is defined in the DSM V. In the past, this has been referred to as “addiction.” Instead you can say, “person with a substance use disorder.” Substance use disorder refers to drug use that has in some way become problematic in a person’s life. Much like other issues that arise, treating it with support, medication, and without stigma is the most effective strategy.

Problematic/chaotic use

This is how many people who are dependent on a substance or struggle with managing their drug use in a way that doesn’t leave them vulnerable prefer to refer to themselves -- to keep things less clinical. Some people prefer to be referred to as “people experiencing chaotic use.” The degrees to which people have been affected may vary and are most highly influenced by factors like race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and access to resources.

If you’re providing a service, resource, or support --don’t stigmatize

People frequently use less than friendly language to describe themselves, and that’s their prerogative. Do not correct people with lived experience on their preferred way to refer to themselves. Use respectful language to show people who use drugs that you respect them with your words.

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Other Important Terms/Concepts

Re-initiating use (after a period of abstinence)

The term relapse is steeped in moral judgement and stigma. People are most at risk of dying when they use alone. Removing stigma from how you refer to someone's experience can build a rapport that allows you to provide meaningful support instead of further adding to the shame they might feel.

Supervised Consumption Space

This is a space where people who use drugs can consume them (via injecting, snorting, eating, and in some cases smoking) under medical supervision. This makes the process safer, and ensures people have access to sterile supplies and don't die. Of 102 sites in 63 cities, there has never been a death in one of these facilities.

Highly Stigmatized Drugs

The "hard/soft" dichotomy of drug use is harmful to those using more highly stigmatized drugs such as meth, heroin, crack, and some other recognizable substances. This change in language recognizes that people can use any substance responsibly and that problematic/chaotic use depends on the person, not the substance.

Sterile/Used

These terms can be used to refer to injecting equipment like syringes or any other drug paraphernalia. The clean/dirty dichotomy creates a false narrative that people who use drugs are inherently unclean. This is not only false, but extremely stigmatizing. The clean/dirty dichotomy should NEVER be used to describe people.

TRIGGER WARNING: The following section denotes words not to use. If you've been stigmatized in the past, you don't need to read any further.

Try not to use	Absolutely don't use
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Addiction• Relapse• Hard/soft drugs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Junkie• Addict• Substance abuser• Druggie• Clean/dirty• Shooting gallery