



Using Person First Language

Language is a powerful tool. The words we use can affect the way people receive and perceive our message. Our words can convey support, understanding and encouragement, but can also cause harm and create barriers to treatment and recovery.

In an effort to end stigma surrounding addiction and those who use substances, NYS OASAS strongly encourages the use of person first language when discussing addiction or substance use disorder. Person first terminology focuses on using language that reflects we are all people first. For example, calling someone an ‘addict’ is dehumanizing and links a substance use disorder to a person’s individual identity. The person first approach is non-judgmental and does not define a person by a health condition.

NYS adopted “Person First” legislation in August 2007, requiring the use of ‘person first’ language.

Below are examples of stigmatizing words and language and suggestions on what should be said to support a person first approach. Keep in mind, those with lived experiences may sometimes use language in the left column when telling their personal story. Stigma can be internalized so this list may be helpful for them as well.

INSTEAD OF SAYING:		CONSIDER SAYING:
Abuse	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For drugs: use • For prescription medications: Misuse
Abuser	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person with, or experiencing, substance use disorder • Person who misuses substances
Addict	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with substance use disorder
Addicted Baby	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baby born of a parent who used substances while pregnant • Baby with signs of substance withdrawal from prenatal exposure • Newborn exposed to substances during pregnancy
Addicted To [name of substance]	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a [name of substance] use disorder • Person who uses [name of substance]
Addictive Personality	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vulnerable to addiction
Alcoholic	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person with alcohol use disorder • Person with problematic alcohol use
Clean	→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For toxicology results: tested negative • When referring to an individual: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in remission or recovery • abstinent from substances • not drinking or using substances • not currently or actively using substances



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INSTEAD OF SAYING:

CONSIDER SAYING:

Compliant with...

- Consistent with ...
- Working toward...
- Participating in...

Crackhead, Meth head

- A person with a crack cocaine use disorder
- A person with a methamphetamine use disorder

Detox

- Withdrawal management

Dirty

- For toxicology screen results: tested positive
- When referring to an individual:
 - currently using [name of substance]
 - currently drinking or using substances

Dope Sick

- Experiencing acute withdrawal symptoms

Drug Abuse

- Substance use disorder

Drug of Choice

- Use of [*name of substance*]

Drug Offender

- Person whose substance use has had legal consequences

Drug Problem or Habit

- Substance use or misuse

Drunk (*person*)

- Person who engages in unhealthy alcohol use

Former Addict

- Person in recovery or long-term recovery
- Person no longer using substances

Gambler or Compulsive Gambler

- Person who gambles
- Person who experiences problems when they gamble

Intravenous/IV drug user

- Person who injects substances



Using Person First Language

INSTEAD OF SAYING:

Junkie

Lapse / Relapse / Slip

Medication assisted treatment

Non-compliant/ Resistant/ Unmotivated/ Nonadherent (with respect to someone's participation in services or care)

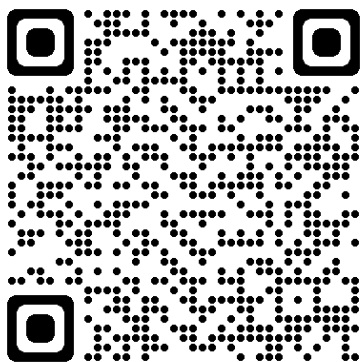
Prescription medication abuse

Reformed addict

Sober

Substance or drug abuser

Untreated addict



CONSIDER SAYING:

- Person with active substance use or misuse
- Experienced a recurrence of use or misuse
- Resumed/returned to use or misuse
- Medication for Addiction Treatment
- Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)
- Medication for Alcohol Use Disorder (MAUD)
- Not participating or not in agreement with the treatment plan
- Opted not to
- Has not begun
- Feels ambivalent regarding change
- Non-medical use of a prescription medication
- Person who previously used substances
- In recovery
- No longer using substances
- Person who uses substances
- Person who is using [*name of substance*] and not currently engaged in substance use disorder treatment



Office of Addiction Services and Supports