



## People-First Language: Substance Use Disorder and Stigma

Substance use is a health condition shaped by health and social factors (PHAC, 2020). Substance Use Disorders are complex, treatable chronic medical conditions, not a choice or moral failure. It is important to treat Substance Use Disorders as we would any other health condition. However, stigma is a significant barrier for people in achieving wellbeing and good health. Substance use stigma contributes to poorer quality of care and health inequities (PHAC, 2020), often emerging in the form of derogatory language that shames and belittles people. Such language can lead to a cycle of behaviours and attitudes that isolate and marginalize people who use substances. Using person-first language to talk about substance use ensures the person is seen as a person first, not as a specific health condition or behaviour. Choosing to counteract substance use stigma with the words we use can help to break down barriers.

Respectful	Stigmatizing
People who use substances People who occasionally use substances (in some contexts) People with living experience	Drug users / Users Recreational drug use / abuse
People with a substance use disorder People with living experience of a substance use disorder	Addicts, Junkies, Pot Heads, Crack Heads
People struggling with their substance use People with substance use disorders	Drug abusers
People who inject drugs	Injectors
People with alcohol use disorder	Alcoholics, people with alcoholism
People who have used substances People with lived experience	Former drug addict Referring to a person as being “dirty” or “clean”
People in recovery/long term recovery from substance use disorders	Recovering addicts
Recurrence of substance use Recurrence of substance use disorder symptoms	Relapse, Lapse, Slip, used again
Facilitating wellness	Facilitating abstinence
Substance use Substance use disorder (in some contexts)	Substance/drug abuse Substance/drug misuse Substance/drug habit

For more information, see the Community Addictions Peer Support Association website:  
<https://capsa.ca>



**References:** Public Health Agency of Canada. (2019). Communicating about Substance Use in Compassionate, Safe and Non-Stigmatizing Ways. Government of Canada. Retrieved on March 25, 2021, from:  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/communicating-about-substance-use-compassionate-safe-non-stigmatizing-ways-2019.html>