

PHOENIX FUTURES GUIDE TO RECOVERY FRIENDLY LANGUAGE

EXTERNAL VERSION 1.3

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource has been developed in partnership between Phoenix Futures and FAVOR and in consultation with people with lived and living experience of using drugs and alcohol dependently.

This guide is aimed at people who work with people who use drugs and alcohol, people who work in the media, professionals and the general public.

Most people with living or lived experience of using substances have their own use of language that is meaningful to them, however, it can often be misunderstood or not understood at all by those outside of their communities. This guide is intended to offer recommendations on using language to empower people in active addiction and recovery and to reinforce the impact of person-centred language on challenging stigma.

This guide is by no means intended to influence how people in recovery or active addiction chose to self-identify when talking about themselves or suggest what language they should use to describe their own experiences when talking to people either inside or outside of their communities.

This guide is an ongoing piece of work, as the use of language evolves over time to reflect our changing lives, circumstances, experiences, and culture. As such the guide will be updated to reflect that shift.

WHY THIS RESOURCE WAS DEVELOPED

Stigma and discrimination of people who use, have used drugs and alcohol dependently and their families is prevalent and entrenched in society, it can create unnecessary barriers to accessing treatment and inhibit those who wish to move forwards in their recovery.

A fundamental vehicles of change is the language that we use and how we talk about people who use drugs and alcohol and their circumstances. Language is powerful it can either undermine a person's experiences and create a culture of blame and shame or it can promote hope and show that recovery is possible by not labelling a person by the substances they use.

The language we use when talking to or about people who use substances should be inclusive, empowering and person centered, meaning that the focus is on the person and not their substance use.

LANGUAGE & IDENTITY

This guide is not meant to be an exhaustive list of language to use, and not to use. What became clear through our research is the complexity of the nuances of language and preference very much depends on the individual and the context. What one person might find empowering another might find patronising, labelling or not applicable to them.

For example, to many people in recovery self-identifying as an 'Addict' and /or 'Alcoholic' and admitting their powerlessness over a substance is a gateway to greater empowerment. This use of language is part of a culture that helps them initiate and sustain their identity and recovery.

However, because someone self-refers as a certain term or uses specific language to describe their circumstances, this does not make it acceptable for people outside of their community to use the same terminology or language when talking to or about people who use/have used substances.

When people unfamiliar with recovery terminology hear loaded language such as, 'Addict' and / or 'Alcoholic' it can create negative biases that lead towards stigma and discrimination. Therefore, It is important that the language used when talking to and about people who use / have used substances dependently by the media, professionals and the public is considerate, inclusive and person centered.

PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY & LANGUAGE

When talking about recovery it is important to acknowledge that there is not one pathway to recovery, recovery is a highly personal process and whilst people can share common experiences everyone's recovery journey is unique to them. A pathway that might work for one person might not work for another.

It is impossible to define what the best language is for everyone in every circumstance when it comes to talking about recovery and addiction. However, we should recognise that words matter. Words influence thoughts and actions; they affect those we speak to and those we speak about.

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR USE OF LANGUAGE

- The language you use should not define a person by their substance use or circumstance, try to use 'People first' language. i.e., 'people who use our services' rather than 'service user', or, 'a person who is currently using drugs', rather than 'drug user.'

- Use terms that are strength based and empowering, for example instead of talking about someone who is 'non-compliant' or 'unengaged' use terms such as 'chooses not to'. Or 'doesn't wish to'
- Use sensitive recovery focused language, being careful not to disempower or victimise people seeking help for drug and alcohol use or their mental health.
 - Avoid language that attributes blame such as 'battling addiction', 'fighting addiction' - which can imply there are winners and losers and that people still in active addiction are not 'fighting hard enough'
 - Try to avoid language that can trivialise a person's circumstances such as 'drug problems' 'alcohol issues' 'mental health problems'
 - Where appropriate use language that inspires hope that people can change – instead of implying that dependency to substances is a fixed state labelling someone as a drug user we could say 'a person who is currently using drugs' or 'Alex is currently facing multiple needs'
- Avoid terms that make people feel like the problem such as 'complex needs', 'mental health problems' instead look for language that is open such as 'people facing multiple needs' and 'Jay has a history of depression and anxiety'
- Avoid using unnecessarily complicated language and jargon that is hard to understand. Where possible use plain simple English that is accessible and not a cause for confusion

PLAIN ENGLISH

Plain English is copy written with the reader in mind, When copy is written clearly and concisely it is more understandable and accessible for the reader

The basic principles of plain English are

- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Keep your sentences short
- Prefer active verbs
- Use 'you' and 'we'
- Use words that are appropriate for the reader

WHEN TALKING TO OR ABOUT PEOPLE IN ADDICTION AND RECOVERY

TRY TO USE THESE WORDS	INSTEAD OF THESE WORDS
People People using our services People that we support Use the person's name	Service User Individuals Client
Community Members (Residential)	Service User Individuals Residents
Problematic substance use Substance use Problematic alcohol / drug use	Substance misuse Substance abuse Substance use issues
Person currently using drugs / alcohol Person using drugs problematically Person with a current dependency on...	Addict, Alcoholic
Currently using drugs Currently using alcohol Currently using substances	Relapsed Using again Fallen off the wagon Had a set back
Dependency	Addiction
Person facing multiple needs	Complex needs Person with multiple needs
Person with a history of Mental health condition	Person is anxious / depressed Mental health problem
Justice System	Criminal Justice System
Person with a conviction / convictions Person with a historic conviction	Offender