

Words Matter: How to Talk About Addiction



Instead of...	Say...	Why It Matters
Addict	Person with a substance use disorder	Person-first language reduces stigma and emphasizes the individual, not the disorder
Alcoholic	Person with alcohol use disorder	Person-first framing helps separate identity from condition
Drug abuser	Person who uses drugs / Person with a substance use disorder	“Abuse” implies moral failing; this language is more clinical and accurate
Clean (to describe sobriety)	In recovery / Not currently using	“Clean” implies that people are dirty
Dirty (for positive drug test)	Tested positive for substance use	Neutral language avoids judgment
Former addict / Reformed addict	Person in recovery	Avoids labels and emphasizes the ongoing nature of recovery
Habit (for drug use)	Substance use disorder	“Habit” downplays addiction as a medical condition
Drug user	Person who uses drugs	Highlights the person, not the behavior
Abuse / Problem / Junkie	Substance use / Person with a substance use disorder	Non-stigmatizing, medically appropriate terminology
Relapse	Recurrence of use	Emphasizes chronic nature of disease and reduces shame