

ADVANCING THE USE OF PERSON-FIRST AND NON-STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE

Words describing substance use disorders (SUD) have a significant impact on those struggling with their disease and how they are treated. For individuals who have criminal justice histories, words that are used to describe their experiences and life events can be critical to their success. Indeed, attention to person-first language is important to the recovery and rehabilitation of those who have lived experience in the justice system.¹

To advance the broader aims of a healthy and just society, the regular use of language that is non-

prejudicial is critical. This document outlines a person-first language approach and offers guiding principles and recommendations regarding accurate and non-pejorative terminology.

It is recommended that the terminology and definitions provided in this document be used by JCOIN HUBS/CORE and partners in JCOIN documents (i.e., protocols, manuals, instruments, etc.), publications and presentations.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Person-first language.

The use of respectful, accurate, compassionate, and non-pejorative language is central to minimizing prejudicial and discriminatory practices. Person-first language—e.g., “person(s) with,” “people who”—leads with the person, rather than describing people as a condition or characteristic or life event.

Health terminology that is clinically accurate, and not pejorative.

The term “substance use disorder” (SUD)—as opposed to “substance abuse”—is in alignment with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and the International Classification of Diseases.

Justice terminology that is accurate, and not prejudicial or pejorative.

Different parts of the justice system use terminology that may necessarily reflect a person’s legal disposition or status. For JCOIN purposes, the aim is to advance, where possible, language that is accurate and aligned with justice terms, yet is not pejorative or prejudicial. So, for example, a person in a jail or community corrections treatment program may be referred to as a participant, not an offender.

Respect for people’s preferences.

It is only for individuals within any segment of society to choose which terminology they prefer when referring to themselves. As an example, while people with SUD may choose to refer to themselves as “addicts,” it is not appropriate for anyone else to apply that label to another. A person who has been incarcerated may refer to themselves as an “ex-con,” but it is not appropriate for others to select this language.

TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS FOR JCOIN

Person-First Language

Instead of “substance abuser,” “addict,” “former offender” or other terms that label people by their characteristics or condition, non-stigmatizing terminology recognizes the person first, e.g., people, person(s), individual(s).

Examples:

- People/person(s)/individual(s) with SUD
- People who use drugs
- People in recovery from addiction
- People involved in the justice system (PIJS)
- People in jail / people in prison / people on probation / people on parole
- People who've been incarcerated
- People with lived experience in the justice system

Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

Substance use disorders occur when the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.ⁱⁱ According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), SUDs are characterized by clinically significant impairments in health, social function, and impaired control over substance use and are diagnosed through assessing cognitive, behavioral, and psychological symptoms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Opioid (rather than Opiate)

“Opiate” refers to drugs, such as morphine, taken directly from the poppy plant. “Opioid” is broader, referring to all substances, whatever their origin—plant-based, synthetic, or endogenous (i.e., endorphins) that interact with opioid receptors in the body. For simplicity, opioid can be used universally.

Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)

Opioid use disorder (OUD) is a substance use disorder involving opioids.

Medications for Addiction Treatment (MAT)

This refers to addiction treatment involving the use of FDA-approved medications, such as methadone, naltrexone, and buprenorphine.^{iv} The term “medication-assisted treatment” reinforces the misconception of a “replacement addiction” and can worsen stigma around opioid use, says John Kelly, who founded the Recovery Research Institute and studies the use of language.^v Thousands of other health conditions involve medication without using the word “assisted.”

Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD)

MOUD refers to FDA-approved medications that are used to treat opioid use disorder.

Use (i.e., Alcohol Use, Drug Use, Substance Use)

The term “abuse” is stigmatizing and also not clinically accurate. While many organizations also have suggested “misuse,” others have described it as problematic. Tran et al. in 2018 described both “abuse” and “misuse” as words to avoid, indicating that these words are judgmental, negate the fact that substance use disorders are a medical condition, and are not conducive to fostering the trust and respect required when engaging with people who use substances.^{vi} Additionally, in a first-ever study of people who use heroin asking what they prefer to be called, the least preferred words were those that suggested misuse or dependence.^{vii}

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