

“The most obvious gifts of knowledge that recovering people can bestow on their communities are their stories — stories that unveil the experience of addiction, stories that communicate the reality and hope of recovery, and stories detailing their knowledge of how such recovery can be initiated and sustained.”
— William White

MISSOURI RECOVERY NETWORK

The Statewide Voice for Recovery

The Language of Recovery

This fact sheet was developed to educate individuals on the importance of language and on stigmatizing words that have the ability to demean or demoralize those in or seeking recovery. This sheet draws attention to the terminology that currently causes confusion and perpetuates stigma, and it promotes the use of words that will advance the understanding of substance use disorders as a health issue.

Knowledge is Stigma’s Greatest Enemy

In discussing substance use disorders, words can be powerful when used to inform, clarify, encourage, support, enlighten, and unify. However, stigmatizing words have the ability to discourage, isolate, misinform, and embarrass. It is necessary to assure that the use of language related to recovery does not stigmatize or alienate individuals, but encourages recovery and facilitates hope in those seeking recovery. Inappropriate use of language can negatively impact the way society perceives substance use and the people who are affected by it. Language frames what those in recovery think about themselves and their own ability to change.

But most importantly, language intentionally and unintentionally propagates stigma: the mark of dishonor and disgrace. To refer to people who are addicted as alcohol or substance *abusers* misstates the nature of their condition and calls for social rejection, sequestration, and punishment. **There is no other medical condition to which the term “abuse” is applied.** Stigma is harmful, distressing, and marginalizing to the individuals, groups, and populations who bear it. However, stigma’s greatest enemy is knowledge and new language will help open the doorway to such knowledge.

One way we can all combat stigma is to stop perpetuating the negative connotations with the words we use. Words like “addict,” “alcoholic,” “user,” and “abuser” reinforce stigma by creating negative images.

Language as a Barrier to Recovery

Because of the social stigma that has been placed on alcohol/drug dependence treatment, many people may feel that alcohol/drug dependence is a sign of moral weakness and shame which may prevent someone from seeking help.

Society imposes stigma and its damage on those in and seeking recovery because many still believe that addiction is a character flaw or weakness that cannot be cured. The stigma against people with addictions is so deeply rooted that it continues even in the face of scientific evidence that addiction is a treatable disease and even when we know people in our families and communities who are living wonderful lives in long-term recovery.

“At one point, we had the stigma of leprosy. Nobody spoke about leprosy. We had stigma regarding cancer. There’s still a significant stigma with some of the mental illnesses, but much less so than there used to be. But the one that’s lagging behind is addiction,” says Dr. Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Language is the Key to Liberation

MRN asks that you consider the language used to describe alcohol and other drug use and disorders, the individuals affected by these conditions, and their related behaviors, comorbidities, treatment, and recovery in this informational fact sheet. We cannot expect the stigma surrounding substance abuse recovery to change unless we change our language.

MRN is specifically making an appeal for language that:

- Respects the worth and dignity of all persons (“people-first language”)
- Focuses on the medical nature of substance use disorders and treatment
- Promotes the recovery process in all forms
- Avoids perpetuating negative stereotypes and biases through the use of slang and idioms





MISSOURI
RECOVERY
NETWORK

*The Statewide Voice
For Recovery*

Bringing Awareness,
Education, and Public
Understanding of
Recovery Throughout
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Fighting Stigma

There are many ways to reduce stigma's far-reaching impact, including using respectful language that puts the person before the illness. Never use terms like "drunk," "junkie," or "alcoholic" to refer to a person in recovery and correct those that do use such language. Remember, what you permit you promote.

MRN also encourages organizations to provide professional development opportunities for staff regarding diversity, mental health, and substance issues to help foster an inclusive working environment. Substance use should be included in discussions about diversity, just as you would discuss cultural diversity, religious beliefs, physical disability, and sexual orientation. The Missouri Recovery Network encourages you to spread the understanding that substance use disorders are a disease just like any other physical or mental illness.

Moving Forward

However, most importantly, as advocates for recovery we need to know much more about the thoughts and preferences of the individuals and families who are affected by alcohol and drug use: how do they feel about their own and others' use of the terminology discussed above? What language would they like us to use, and what are the implications for the services and policies they need?

As we move forward in our recovery efforts, engaging the voices of these individuals is paramount. Input from clinicians, researchers, policymakers, advocates, families, and community members is also necessary to further this discussion of "the language issue."

Attention to language is a critical step toward the reduction of stigma, but it is only one step. Reducing stigma involves not only changes in language, but also a significant transformation in people's perceptions and attitudes, and in society's discriminatory policies. These developments are essential to creating a society that fully supports prevention, treatment, and recovery for substance use disorders.

Education and outreach are key to removing the social stigma associated with addiction. **The bottom line is... stigma costs lives!** Improved public awareness of the scientific realities of addiction can save lives by encouraging individuals with alcohol and other drug problems to seek help early in the progression of their illness, when it is most treatable. Recovery advocates believe that public education regarding addiction and recovery will diminish the stigma, improve public policies, and **SAVE LIVES**. It will take more than a change in language to alter society's perceptions, attitudes, and policies. Nonetheless, it is an essential component to reducing stigma, and hence the obstacles and barriers to recovery that currently exist.

CHANGING THE RECOVERY DISCUSSION	
Popular Language	Proposed Language
"Self-help"	"Recovery support"
"Untreated alcoholics/addicts"	"Individuals not yet in recovery" or "Individuals seeking recovery"
"Consumer representation"	"Recovery representation"
"Drug/alcohol abuse"	"Misuse," "Substance use disorder"
"Alcoholic/addict"	"Person experiencing an alcohol/drug problem"
"Treatment works"	"Recovery works"
"Enable"	"Empower"