Substance use disorder is one of the most stigmatized medical conditions in the US.[1] Stigma can drive people away from seeking the help they need. Research indicates that it is one of the most significant barriers to seeking and remaining in treatment.[2]

State court judges play a significant role in the nation's response to substance use disorders. After self-referrals, the justice system is the single largest source for the referral of individuals to treatment. Many years of experience by judges involved in a myriad of specialty court programs has demonstrated the positive outcomes that are enhanced by the combination of effective and appropriate treatment services while under the oversight and supervision of a judge. Research has also demonstrated that the direct interactions between the judge and the court participant can play an important role in successful outcomes.

For those suffering from substance use disorders, the particular words used by the judge are an important component of that interaction. An inappropriate choice of language can contribute to stigma. Judges can begin to reduce stigma and help save lives just by changing language. It is not about being sensitive, polite, or politically correct; it is about doing all one can to increase access to quality treatment and care.[3]

A judge's role to remain impartial, but not be indifferent, can often be difficult. For example, the behaviors of a person with an active substance use disorder (SUD) may be unlikely to prompt responses that are compassionate or patient. However, words are powerful. In cases involving drug/alcohol use, an appropriate choice of words can make the difference between reinforcing negative stereotypes and promoting positive change. A review of literature on this topic overwhelmingly encourages the use of language that reflects the medical nature of SUDs and promotes recovery. The National Judicial Opioid Task Force supports this research that recognizes Language Matters and encourages the use of respectful language to describe SUD and people that use drugs. To this end, judges should consider "changing the script".[4]

Instead of:	*Try:*
Addict/Junkie/Druggie/Drug Abuser	Person with a substance use disorder
Alcoholic	Person with an alcohol use disorder
Clean/Clean Screen	Abstinent; Substance free; Testing negative for substance use
Denial/Resistant	Ambivalent
Dirty/Dirty Screen	Actively using; testing positive for substance use
Drug habit	Substance use disorder
Drug Overdose	Drug Poisoning
Former/Reformed Addict/ Alcoholic	Person in recovery; Person in long-term recovery
Manipulative	You need to work on a more effective way to get your needs met
Methadone Maintenance; Opioid Replacement	Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT); Medication Assisted Recovery (MAR)
Non-compliant	Choosing not to…; looking for other options
Recreational/Casual/Experimental User	New to drug use; Initiating drug use; Using drugs for non-medical reasons
Relapse	Return to use; Recurrent use
Relapse is part of recovery	Recurrence or return to use may occur as you move through recovery
Relapse prevention	Recovery Management

Notes

[1] Barry, C.L. McGinty, E.E., Pescosolido, B.A., & Goldman, H.H. (2014). Stigma, discrimination, treatment effectiveness, and policy; public views about drug addiction and mental illness. Psychiatric Services, 65 (10), 1269-1272.

[2] National Association of Drug Court Professionals (2016). Toward an Addiction-ary: Language, Stigma, Treatment, and Policy https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/file_download/inline/5fc1cc14-5c97-43ad-a082-1e783d8c7ca4

[3] Shatterproof (2019). Stigma Reducing Language https://www.shatterproof.org/about-addiction/stigma/stigma-reducing-language

[4] Huffington Post (2017). Here's One Simple Way We Can Change the Conversation about Drug Abuse. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/03/drug-addiction-language_n_6773246.html

Faces and Voices of Recovery, Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network, Phoenix Center (2016). https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/file_download/inline/50d9a8f4-36c7-4dab-8de1-51f690421b05

Resources

The National Alliance of Advocates for Buprenorphine Treatment (2008): The Words We Use Matter. Reducing Stigma through Language. https://www.naabt.org/documents/NAABT_Language.pdf

SAMHSA's Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (2017). Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/sites/default/files/resources/sud-stigma-tool.pdf

The Boston Globe (2016). Language of addiction itself can hurt, advocates say. https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/02/03/finding-right-words-for-addiction/EdNzUNS10KQDinOEk3lQpN/story.html

White, William L. The Rhetoric of Recovery Advocacy: An Essay on the Power of Language. http://www.naabt.org/documents/LANGUAGEBillWhite.pdf

Michael Botticelli, TEDxMidAtlantic (2016). Addiction is a disease. We should treat it like one. https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_botticelli_addiction_is_a_disease_we_should_treat_it_like_one

Healthline (2017). How to Be Human: Talking to People with Addiction or Substance Use Disorders https://www.healthline.com/health/addiction/how-to-be-human-language-around-substance-abuse

Szalavitz, Maia. NPR (2017). Why We Should Say Someone is a "Person with an Addiction", not an Addict. https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/06/11/531931490/change-from-addict-to-person-with-an-addiction-is-long-overdue

Regional Judicial Opioid Initiative – Ohio Team. Common Language Glossary. http://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/JCS/specDockets/resources/commonLangGlossary.pdf