



At Rideauwood we understand the power of words, and are committed to reducing stigma. We are dedicated to using language that is inclusive, respectful, and grounded in the latest evidence-based practices for treating problematic substance use and addiction. Our goal is to create an environment where individuals feel safe and supported on all pathways to recovery and wellbeing. But we can't do it alone. We invite you to join us in changing the conversation about substance use health and addiction. Together, we can dismantle stigma, one word at a time.

The Power of Words

Language plays a powerful role in shaping how we think, feel, and act toward others. When it comes to discussing substance use and addiction, the words we choose can either help pave the way to healing or reinforce stigma, creating unnecessary barriers to recovery and wellbeing.

When we use stigmatizing language like "addict" or "drug abuser," we reduce a person's identity to reflect only what their issues are. These words carry judgment and reinforce the idea that people with problematic substance use are to blame for their struggles. Stigmatizing language also perpetuates harmful stereotypes that those with an addiction are dangerous, irresponsible, or unworthy of care.

For individuals facing problematic substance use, stigma can be one of the obstacles to seeking and getting the help they need. Stigma reinforces harmful beliefs that addiction is a moral failing or a lack of willpower, rather than recognizing it as a complex, treatable condition. We can shift the conversation by practicing compassionate, person-first language.



Stigma

Stigma refers to negative attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors toward individuals or groups, often based on misunderstanding or stereotypes. For those with problematic substance use and addiction, stigma is particularly damaging.

Changing the Narrative with Person-First Language

One of the simplest ways to reduce stigma is by using person-first language, which starts by emphasizing the individual. This approach is not a hard and fast rule, but a practice that respects the dignity of the person and acknowledges that problematic substance use or problematic gambling are only one aspect of their life, not the defining feature.

We wouldn't label someone with cancer as a "cancerous person," so we shouldn't label someone as a "drug user" or "gambler".

Person-first language is not about being inflexible or "politically correct" —it's about recognizing that addiction—to alcohol and other drugs, gambling, technology, etc.—is a complex issue that is often a symptom of trauma and chronic stress.

In healthcare settings, research shows that the use of stigmatizing language can negatively influence the attitudes of clinicians, leading to lower-quality care. Individuals who feel judged are less likely to seek treatment, fearing they will be met with blame rather than support. This barrier can have life-threatening consequences, especially for those at risk of overdose or severe health issues related to substance use.

Why This Matters: Language as a Tool for Healing

Stigmatizing language doesn't just affect individuals —it impacts families, communities, and society as a whole. Words that shame or dehumanize individuals create an environment where people feel unworthy of help and support. This can lead to greater isolation, worsening health outcomes, and even death in cases of untreated problematic substance use.

In contrast, language that respects the dignity of people with problematic substance use and addiction can foster connection and healing.

When we change how we talk about substance use health and addiction, we create a more supportive and compassionate society. This shift not only benefits those who are directly affected but also builds healthier communities that are better equipped to support health, wellbeing, and recovery.



About Rideauwood

At Rideauwood, we are dedicated to building a healthy, connected community by providing compassionate, evidence-based treatment, prevention, and education for individuals and families affected by substance use, addiction, and mental health issues in Ottawa and the surrounding region.

Our specialized counsellors empower clients to make meaningful and lasting changes in their lives through person-centred support tailored to their unique needs.



[RIDEAUWOOD.ORG](https://rideauwood.org)

Learn More

Understanding Substance Use Health: A Matter of Equity
<https://capsa.ca/2023/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CAPSA-Substance-Use-Health-EN-1.pdf>



Power To The People
<https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/catalyst/power-to-the-people/>



References

Angerer, M. & National Movement to End Addiction Stigma. (n.d.). Addiction Language Guide.
<https://www.shatterproof.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Stigma-AddictionLanguageGuide-v3.pdf>

Health Canada. (2024, April 22). Stigma around drug use. Canada.ca.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/opioids/stigma.html>

Overcoming Stigma through Language: A primer | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. (n.d.). <https://www.ccsa.ca/overcoming-stigma-through-language-primer>

Stigma of addiction. (n.d.). Johns Hopkins Medicine. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/stigma-of-addiction>

Words matter – terms to use and avoid when talking about addiction | National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2023, December 20). National Institute on Drug Abuse. <https://nida.nih.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/health-professions-education/words-matter-terms-to-use-avoid-when-talking-about-addiction>

Words matter: preferred language for talking about addiction | National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2023, November 15). National Institute on Drug Abuse. <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/addiction-science/words-matter-preferred-language-talking-about-addiction>