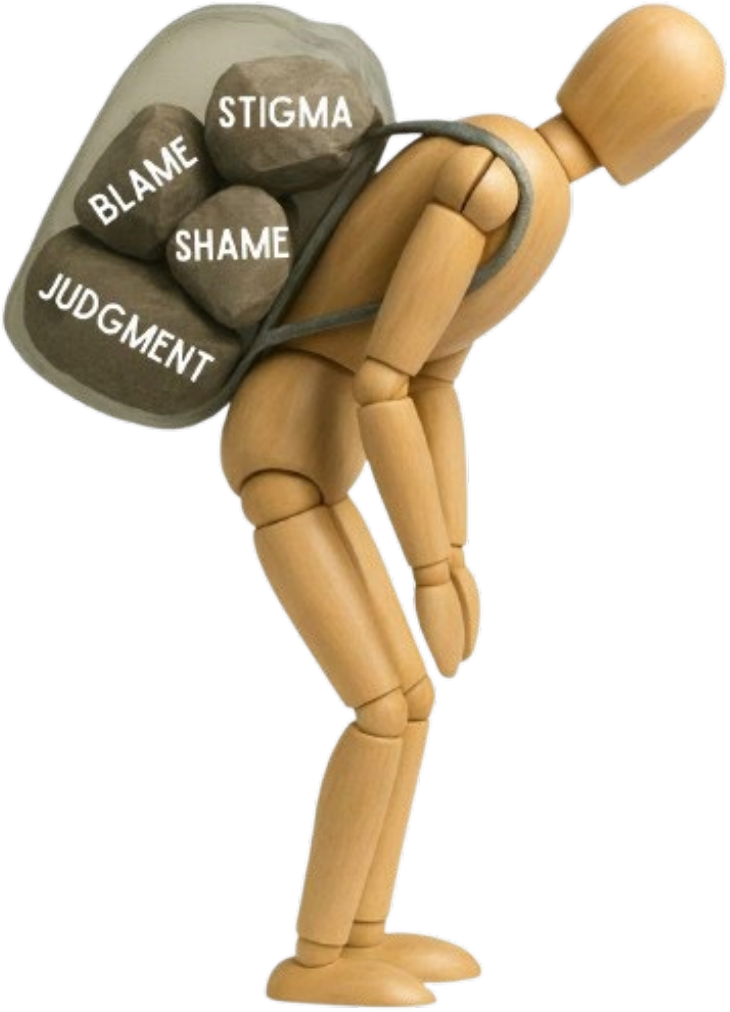
Why Words Matter

The load of mental health and substance use disorders is already heavy; the right words can help lighten the load.



What helps:

- See the person, not the label.
- Use person-first language.
  - She has a substance use disorder.
  - He has autism.
  - They use cannabis.
- Speak with kindness and respect.
- Offer words of hope and support.
- Ask about preferred terms.

What hurts:

- Casual slang, labels, and jokes that shame ("addict," "druggie," "psycho")
- Fear-based terms like:
  - "War on drugs"
  - "Crack epidemic"
- Judging, moralizing, and blaming
  - They are "clean" / "dirty."
  - He is too "weak" to quit.
- Misleading metaphors like "battle" or "victim."

Help our community reduce the negative impact of stigma by using words that support and uplift those that are in need.

Update Worn-Out Words

The words we use can have a big impact on those around us. Some words are worn out and carry negative meanings that can hurt people. It's time to replace them and the negative associations that go along with them. Choose words that are based on our shared humanity and kindness. Word choice makes a difference. Here are some examples of better ways to talk about these ideas:

Worn-Out Language	Suggested Alternative	Rationale
Addict	Person with substance use disorder	Using person-first language promotes dignity and highlights the individual's humanity rather than reducing them to their condition. Using these alternatives avoids labels while focusing on a person's potential for recovery, fostering a more compassionate understanding.
Alcoholic	Person with alcohol use disorder or person in recovery	
Smoker	Person who smokes	
Crazy	Person with a pre-existing mental health disorder	
Mentally ill	Person living with a mental health condition or person with a mental illness	
Clean	In recovery OR test results were negative/non-reactive	Avoid using terms with historically negative connotations that suggest moral judgment.
Person who relapsed	Person who returned to use	These alternatives encourage compassion. They see the value in the person and recognize the broader societal problems that often contribute to a person's present circumstances.
Homeless	Person without housing, person experiencing homelessness	
Convict	Person who has been incarcerated	
Disabled person	Person with a disability	Try not to use pictorial metaphors, negative terms, or slurs that insult particular groups or reduce them to any visible or non-visible disability.
Cripple	Person with a physical disability	
Handicapped	Person with a physical disability	

Choosing words and phrases that uplift our community is an important step toward being inclusive and kind. However, simply changing labels is just the beginning; we also need to address any biases linked to outdated language. Some individuals might still use these old terms to describe themselves, and that's okay. This chart serves as a guide to help us become more mindful of our language with others.

Center for Community Engagement at Chestnut Health Systems

The Center for Community Engagement is funded in full or in part through a State Opioid Response Grant (TI085769) to the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.