STIGMA:
WHAT IS IT AND WHY WORDS MATTER?

Substance use disorder is a disease. It has been nearly 70 years since the medical community has defined SUD as a chronic brain disease. Still today, many think it is a moral failing. The stigma around SUD can make people feel isolated and hesitant to seek treatment or support.

Stigma is discrimination against a group of people, a place, or nation. Stigma for those with substance use disorder (SUD) sometimes consists of false beliefs that people are dangerous, incapable of controlling their disease, or are guilty for it.

While substance use disorders are chronic but treatable medical conditions, research shows that stigma remains due to lack of understanding about the disorders and their effective treatments. **Substance use disorders are more stigmatized than any other medical condition,** and research has shown that people with SUD face stigma at every stage of care.

ADDRESSING STIGMA THROUGH LANGUAGE

Addressing stigma through changing language about SUDs involves **shifting the way we talk** about them to promote understanding, reduce judgement, and encourage supportive attitudes.

Words Matter:

First- Person Language: Instead of saying “addict”, say “person with a substance use disorder.” Using first-person language emphasizes that the individual is more than their condition, reducing labels and promoting dignity.

Choose Neutral, Non-Judgmental Language: Instead of saying “clean,” say “in recovery.” Neutral terms avoid implying moral judgement, fostering a more compassionate view of those affected.

Highlight Recovery and Hope: Instead of saying “suffering from drug addiction,” say “on the pathway to recovery.” Focusing on recovery emphasizes the potential for positive change.

For individuals and families seeking recovery, words matter. One of the best examples of a major shift in language is with the terms “drug abuse” or “substance abuser.” The less stigmatizing term “substance use disorder,” recognizes the chronic and progressive nature of addiction. Terms like “substance abuse” and “substance abuser” have been shown to negatively influence the perceptions of both the general public and healthcare providers, leading to a belief that individuals who use substances deserve punishment rather than treatment or support.

Source: Drug Free America Association

SAY THIS	NOT THAT
Person with a substance use disorder	Addict, junkie, druggie
Person living in recovery	Ex-addict
Person living with an addiction	Battling/suffering from an addiction
Person arrested for a drug violation	Drug offender
Had a setback	Relapsed
Maintained recovery	Stayed clean
Chooses not to at this point	Non-compliance/bombed out

Source: National Council for Behavioral Health