



National Conference
on Gambling Addiction &
Responsible Gambling 2025



Community
Medical Services

CONNECTING RECOVERY | HEALING COMMUNITIES

How We Speak: Undoing Stigmatizing Language in Gambling Recovery

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Learning Objectives

1

Identify 5 **outdated, stigmatizing words/phrases** commonly used, particularly in discussions about gambling-related concerns

2

Describe 2 strategies for using **inclusive, patient-centered language** to foster stigma-free, recovery-focused environments

Disclaimer

- I personally do not use a lot of the words that will be mentioned in this presentation.
- I professionally limit using some of the words as often as possible.
- To learn and implement new language we must undo the stigmatizing language that is prevalent in our industry. In doing so we must talk about it (the obstacle is the way).
- This may be uncomfortable for several, understandable reasons. Many of us have come to see this language as “part of” the work we do and has been embedded in numerous ways.



“Stick and bones may break my bones;
but **words shall never hurt me.**”

STICKS+
STONES

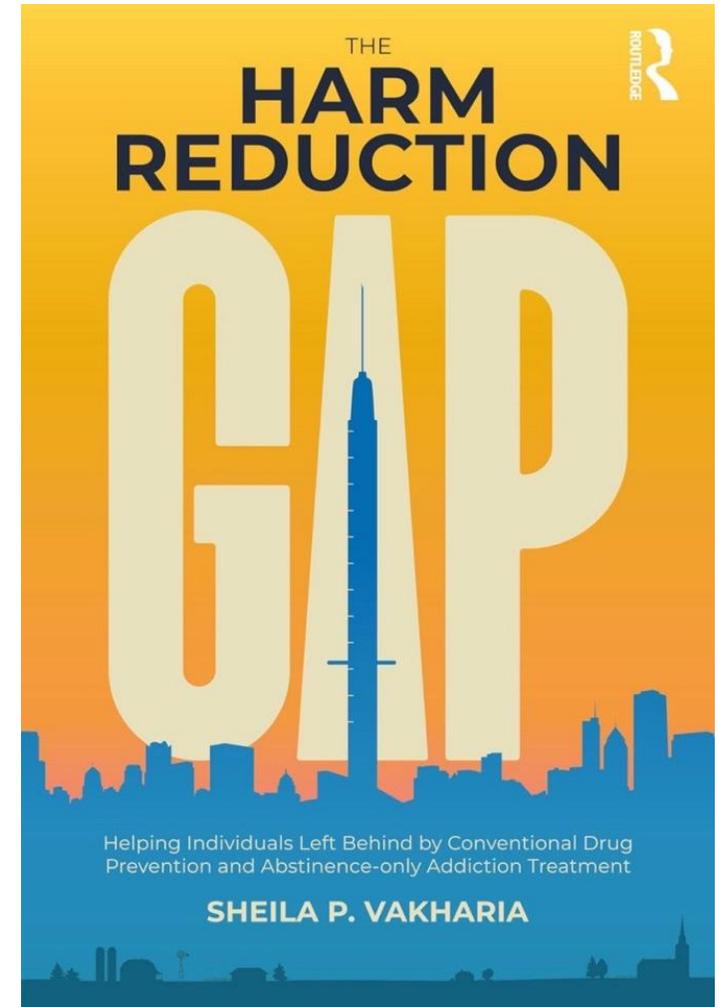
The **Importance** of Language

- Language is important because it is the primary tool for **communication**.
- It allows us to **express our** thoughts, feelings, and ideas to others as well as **understand** the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of **others**.
- Language also enables us to **learn** from one another, **share** knowledge and information, and **build** relationships.
- Plays a crucial role in **education, business, and social** interactions.
- Language **empowers** individuals by providing them with the ability to advocate for themselves, express their rights, and engage in civic participation.
- Shapes individual and collective identities and is a key aspect of **cultural identity**.

How does
language
impact the
people we
serve?

“A **Note** on Language”

- Words **matter**. How we use them can reveal our values, priorities, and perspectives.
- Language is so **powerful** that it can change how we view ourselves and others.
- It can shift our **understanding** of current circumstances and possible solutions.
- Words have **weight** and carry their own connotations, so they can also mean different things to different people.



- Individuals will use language when seeking services, asking for resources, and responding to, “What can we do for you today?”
- Our first interaction with an individual already introduces them to the **language we use**.
- How we talk to people will be their **first experience** with us before receiving any kind of treatment services.
- Those first initial moments can be **the difference** between an experience of being:
 - Seen vs. Unseen.
 - Heard vs. Unheard
 - Humane vs. Inhumane



“You never get a second chance to make a great first impression.”

What is **stigmatizing** language?

- Stigma is a **negative association** with circumstance or trait that can result in **discrimination** against a person for a certain characteristic(s).
- Stigma can also be described as **internal** feelings of **shame** or **judgement** from others.
- Stigmatizing language includes words or phrases with **negative labels** that assign **judgment**.

Labels People by
Their Condition

Implies Moral
Failing or Blame

Uses Negative or
Dehumanizing
Terms

Creates Barriers
to Care and
Support

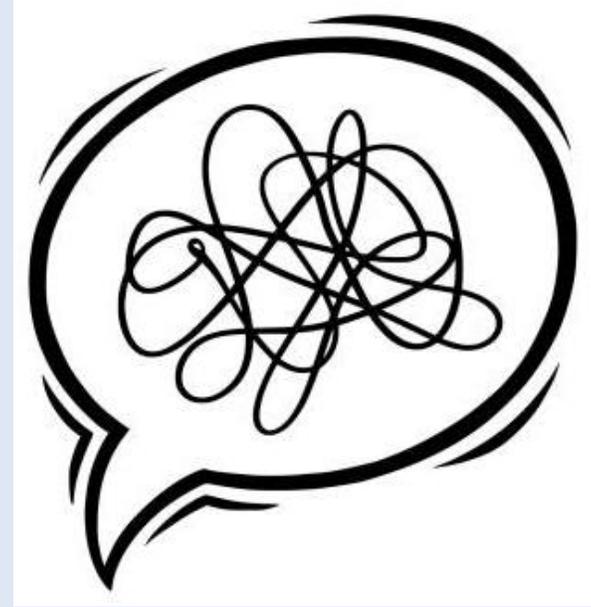
NEWS

Problem gambling can be a damaging addiction

**Problem
gambling** **Gambling
disorder**

**Compulsive
gambler** **Pathological
gambler**

Problem gamblers



How many different words
have we used to describe
problems with gambling?

Stigmas Associated with Gambling

“Pathological”

“Compulsive”

“Irresponsible
Gambler”

“Problem
Gambler”

“Gambling
Addict”

- Systematic literature review which covered **72 articles** and reports, public stigmas covers the **prejudice** and **discrimination** endorsed by the general population that may affect an individual with gambling disorder.
- Generally, attracts:
 - substantial negative stereotypes
 - social distancing
 - emotional reactions
 - status loss
 - discrimination.
- Found to be **more stigmatized** than depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- Respondents reported greater desire for **social distance**, more **negative** stereotypes, and greater beliefs about **devaluation** and **discrimination** for individuals with gambling problems.
- Commonly endorsed stereotypes of people with gambling problems include that they are **irresponsible** and **greedy**.



A person with a gambling disorder (according to respondents of the study) may be perceived as an **idiot**, an **immature** and **reckless** individual, as someone who wants to **easily** earn some extra money or have too much money, someone who is a **liar** and characterized by their **weak** willpower.

Phrases:

“I bet...”

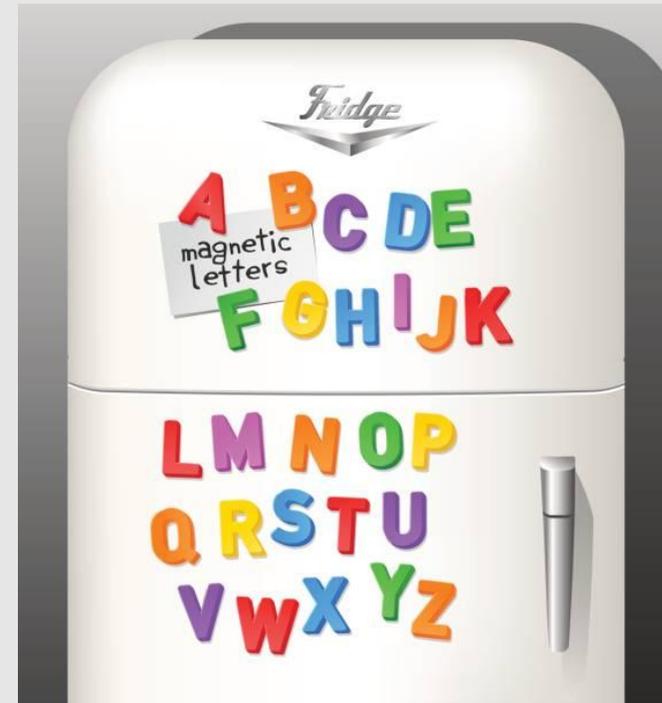
“The hand you’ve been dealt.”

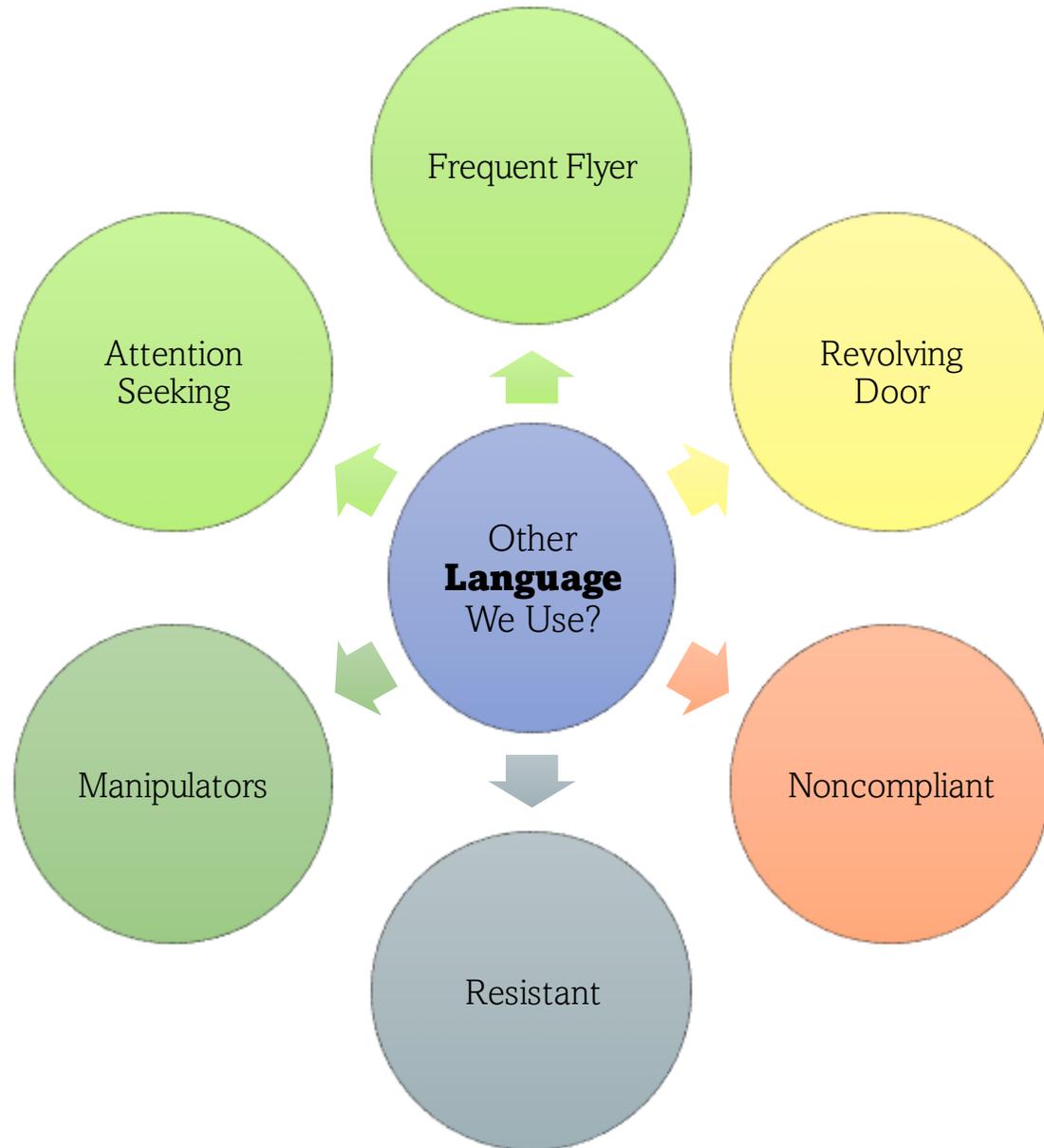
“That’s how the cards fall sometimes.”

“It’s a roll of the dice.”



What **other language** is related to those impacted by gambling?





Maybe your client isn't
"non-compliant." Maybe:

they're not feeling safe with you
they're not feeling safe in general
you're not hearing their concerns
the modality you're using is more harmful
than helpful
there's no flexibility to your approach
you haven't earned your client's trust
you're addressing the wrong thing
you're re-enacting oppression
you're not the best fit for them

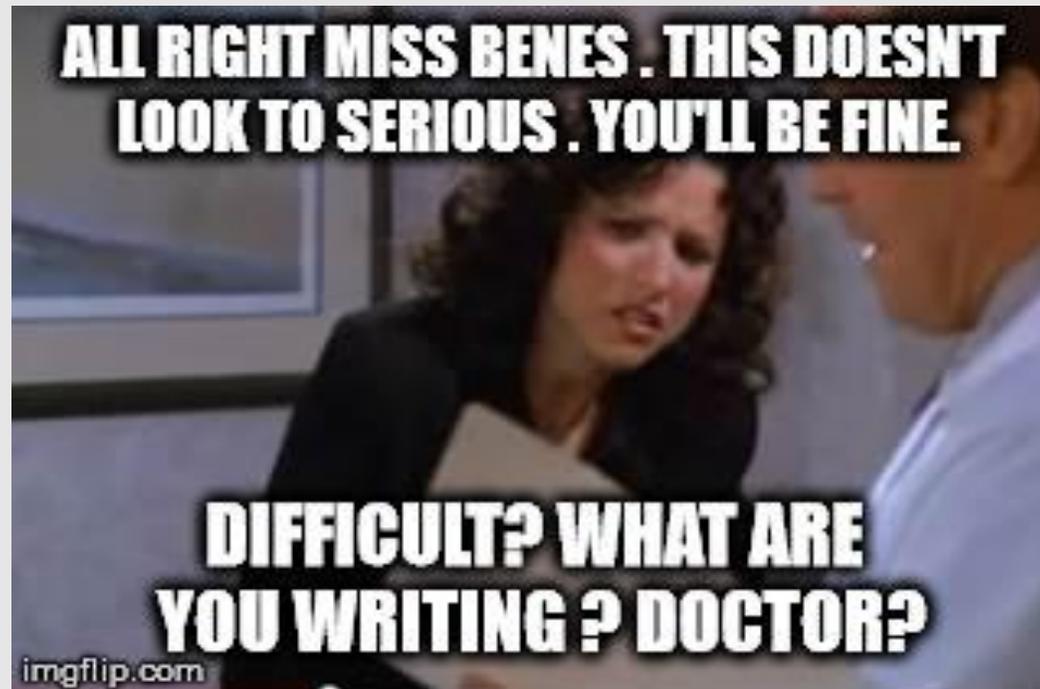
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What we say matters; but what about what we **write** (document)?



substance abuser

substance use disorder

Could the difference in this language change how you view, or treat, an individual?

Research has found that stigmatizing language appears in almost **20%** of clinical notes.

Analyzed physician notes describing **600 patient** encounters at an urban academic medical center:

Five themes representing negative language used by physicians: credibility, stereotyping, difficult patient, disapproval, unilateral decisions.

The **majority of patients** with substance-related diagnoses had **at least one note containing stigmatizing language.**

The Incidence and Disparities in Use of Stigmatizing Language in Clinical Notes for Patients With Substance Use Disorder, Journal of Addiction Medicine, July/August 2023, Vol. 17, Issue 4

National
**Addiction
Treatment**
Week
10.14 - 10.22

Attempting to Gain Community Support for Gambling **Treatment**

“With the new casino opening and increased availability of sports betting we want to make access to treatment for those who are **compulsive gamblers** to get the help they need.”



“With the new casino opening and increased availability of sports betting we want to make access to treatment for those who are **liars** and **reckless** to get the help they need.”

Advocating for **Funds**

“Asking for dedicated funding for helping **pathological gamblers** and prevention programs on the state and national level. Hoping for federal recognition of problem gambling as an **addiction** eligible for resources and treatment.”



When considering the **impact** of stigmatizing language, this may sound like...



“Asking for dedicated funding for helping **people who want to easily earn money** and prevention programs on the state and national level. Hoping for federal recognition of problem gambling as an addiction characterized by their **weak willpower.**”

Damage Caused By Stigmas

- **Prevents People from Seeking Help**
 - Many individuals with gambling disorder **hide their struggles** due to fear of judgment, making them less likely to reach out for support.
 - Terms like "*reckless*," "*irresponsible*," or "*weak*" suggest that gambling problems are **just bad choices** rather than a diagnosable disorder.
- **Reinforces Myths About Gambling Disorder**
 - Stigma often stems from **misconceptions** like:
 - "*If they really wanted to stop, they could.*"
 - "*Only weak-minded people become addicted to gambling.*"
 - "*If they lost all their money, it's their fault.*"
 - In reality, gambling disorder is linked to **changes in brain function** making it much more than a simple lack of willpower.
- **Shifts the Focus Away from Systemic Issues**
 - Stigmatizing language tends to focus on the individual rather than the **wider factors that contribute to gambling problems**, such as:
 - **Accessibility of gambling** (casinos, sports betting, online gambling)
 - **Marketing tactics** that target vulnerable populations
 - **Mental health and co-occurring disorders** (e.g., depression, trauma, substance use)

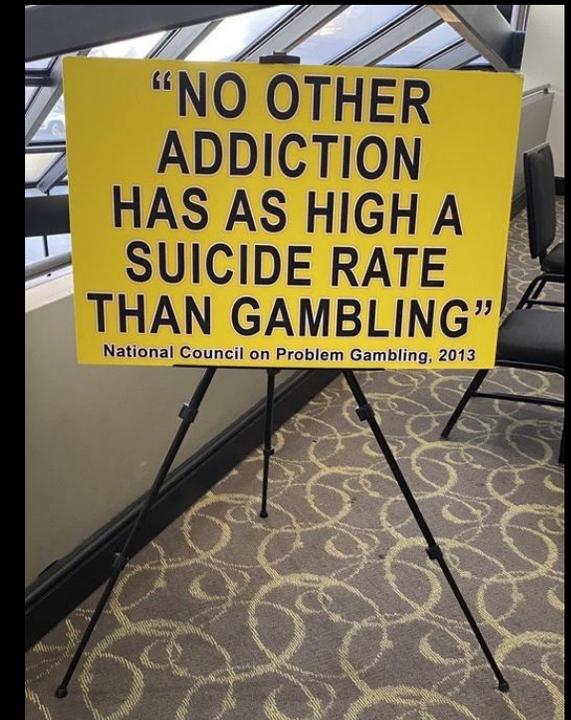
Individuals with gambling problems report two main significant **barriers**:

A desire to manage the problem on one's own.

Shame and fear of stigma.

Gambling & **Suicide**

- We are constantly discussing the impact of stigma and how **stigma kills**.
- Stigmatizing language **drives reinforcement** of shame.
- Gambling struggles to get the necessary research, education, prevention, and treatment available.
- Challenged with getting a seat at the table for gambling resources.
- Gambling Hotlines are suicide prevention hotlines.



How **often** do we come across stigmatizing language?



“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can also **hurt** me. Stones and sticks break only skin, while words are **ghosts that haunt** me. Slant and curved the word-swords fall, it pierces and sticks **inside** me. Bats and bricks may ache through bones, but words can **mortify** me. Pain from words has left its' scar, on mind and heart that's tender. Cuts and bruises have not healed, it's words that I **remember.**”

— **Ruby Redfort**

What if the **individual(s)** uses that language?

- If someone uses stigmatizing language themselves;
 - Explore the **origins** of the language.
 - “Where did you hear or learn about that word?”
 - What **impact** does the language have?
 - “When you say that word or use that language, what happens?”
 - “What is that like for you to hear that word?”
- People have the choice to how they refer to themselves; as helping professionals we should respect but **not necessarily emulate**.
- Ultimately, we want to **hold ourselves accountable** to the language we use while educating others about its impact (individuals, family members, communities, etc.).



What if a helping professional in recovery identifies with that language?

Counselors

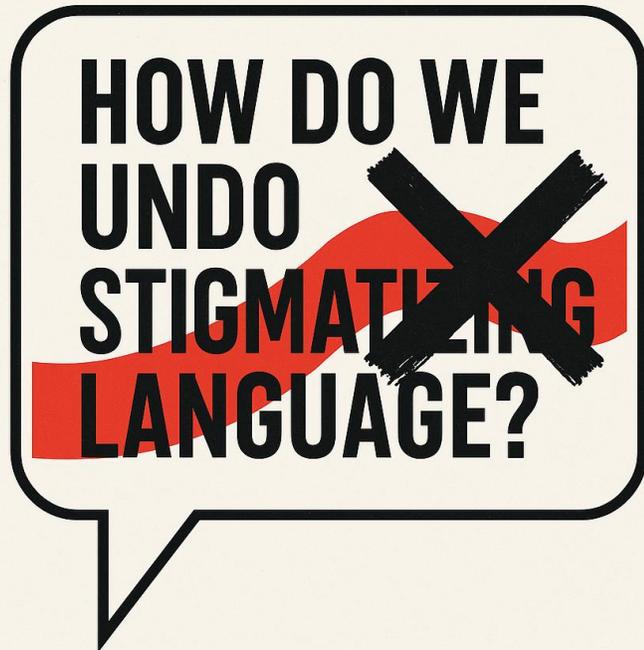
Peer Support

Recovery Coaches

Client Navigators

- Accept how that individual chooses to identify themselves.
- Do not apply that identity to people you are helping.
- Self-Disclosure: “I have type one diabetes” and “I am a type one diabetic.”
 - What’s the difference?





UNDOING STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE

- Identify levels of intervention
- Explore reluctance
- Identify areas where we have stigmatizing language currently
- Speak up
- Limit or minimize use of certain language
- Replace with person-centered language
- Remove from documentation
- Adopt higher standards for speaking engagements
- Advocate for media representation

Interventions

Contact

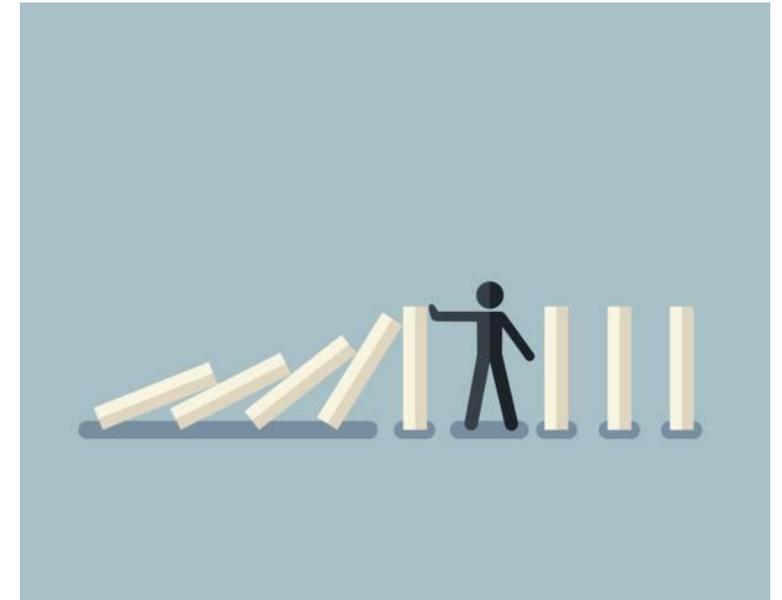
- Creating opportunities to interact with individuals with the stigmatized condition.

Education

- Presenting information to counteract stereotypes and correct misunderstandings of the stigmatized condition.

Advocacy

- Emphasize societal causes of stigmatized conditions and shift focus from the individual to society.



Why are some people ~~resistant~~ to change their language?

reluctant

Constantly reiterated in media, textbooks, books, podcast, etc.

Part of identity

Names of organizations and part of policies/procedures

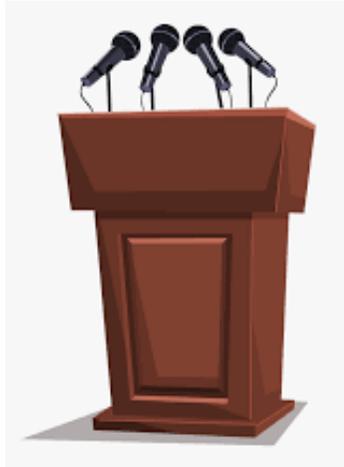
Activates uncomfortable feelings of using/having used stigmatizing language

Requires vulnerability (Ownership of using stigmatizing language)

Lost connection with culture and communities

“When I really started changing the language I was using (say from saying addict to person who uses drugs or person with a substance use disorder) it really meant that I stood to lose some level of connection to this recovery community that I had been a part of.”

How Language **Shows** – Identify Stigmatizing Language



How we talk about people will be heard by members of the community when **presenting** or doing **outreach**. The language we use will be reflected in **policies** and **procedures**. How we refer to individuals will be read in **documentation** and **charts**. The way we treat them will be shared among colleagues during **staffings** and **team meetings**. Language is reflected in the **names** of agencies and organizations.



- “I know it is common to refer to individuals as an addict, but a person-first centered approach would be **person with a gambling disorder.**”
- “Historically, we may refer to this individual as noncompliant or resistant, but it is better to say **nonadherent** or **reluctant.**”
- “This research identifies the term pathological gambler, which for this purpose, was how the individuals were identified. We would identify them today as a **person diagnosed with gambling use disorder.**”
- “I still catch myself saying relapse and am working towards saying **return to gambling.**”



“If you are not comfortable saying it to the person you are helping, we should not feel comfortable saying it amongst each other.”

Limit or Minimize the Use of Certain Language

- Certain language is regulatory requirements and part of treatment modalities.
- Example: Relapse
- Removing the word “relapse” does not interfere with the ability to help someone prevent a return to use.
- Alternative Languages:
 - relapse = **recurrence of a use disorder**
 - one time or short-term period of use = **episode**
 - **return to substance use/gambling**
- Instead of *Relapse Prevention Plan* use “**Prevention Planning**” or “**Harm Reduction Planning.**”
- Instead of *Relapse Prevention Group* use “**Prevention Group**” or “**Recovery Management.**”

When the word “relapse” is used it often results in questioning a person’s character. When you use “return to use” the focus is more on **what happened.**

Word Replacements – **Gambling**

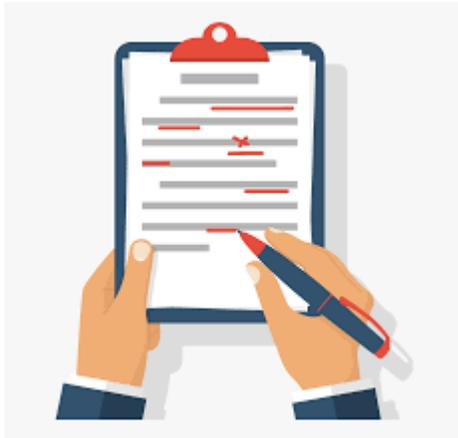
Instead of	Say This
Problem Gambling Pathological Gambling Gambling Addiction Gambling Addict Irresponsible Gambler Compulsive Gambler Personality Gamblers Relief and Escape Gamblers Actions Gamblers	Person with gambling disorder. Person experiencing problems with gambling. Problematic gambling.
I bet...	I imagine... I think the likelihood...
The hand you are dealt.	The experiences you are having.
Let's just roll the dice.	Let's put ourselves out there.



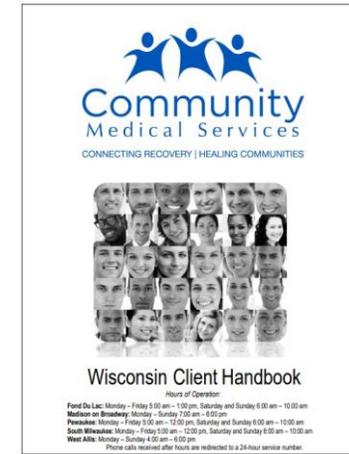
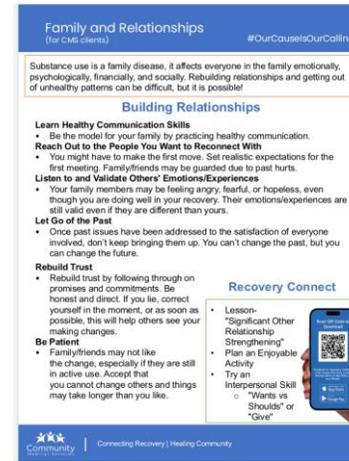
The **differences** between stigmatizing and person-centered language?

Aspect	Stigmatizing Language	Person-Centered Language
Focus	Defines a person by their condition or behavior	Recognizes the person first, separate from their condition.
Tone	Judgmental, negative, or moralizing	Neutral, respectful, and non-judgmental
Impact	Reinforces stereotypes, creates shame, and discourages help-seeking	Encourages support, dignity, and empowerment
Perspective	Assume blame or personal failure	Recognizes complex factors like biology, trauma, and environment
Connotation	Often carries negative or derogatory meanings	Use clinical, supportive, or recovery-oriented language

Removing Language from **Documentation**



- Clinical Documentation
- Printed Materials
- Postings



Instead Of...	Use This...
Processed with patient relapse on substance use/gambling.	Processed with patient recent episode of gambling. Processed recent return to substance use.
Individual is noncompliant with required services.	Individual is reluctant to engage in recommended services.

Research Letter | Substance Use and Addiction

Stigmatizing Substance Use Terminology in Grant Abstracts Following High-Level Language Guidance

Evan L. Eschliman, PhD, MS¹; Haruka Kokaze, MA²; Long Jie Huang, EdM, MA³; et al

Results

Overall, 286 of 498 grant abstracts (53.8%) used any stigmatizing term in FY 2013, and 163 of 639 (25.5%) used any stigmatizing term in FY 2023 ([Figure](#)). The use of stigmatizing terminology for substance use behavior was consistently higher than for people who use substances. *Abuse* was most used across all years, followed by *user*.



This is more
than
semantics.

Language
shapes access,
policy, and
dignity in care.

Language Matters:
Using Non-Stigmatizing, Inclusive, and Person-First Language

THESE HURT 	THESE HELP 
Substance Use	
substance abuse	substance use/misuse
alcoholic	person with alcohol use disorder
addict/junkies/druggies/users	person with a substance use disorder
battling/suffering from an addiction	person living with a substance use disorder
former addict	person in recovery
stayed clean	maintained recovery
dirty/clean drug screen	positive/negative urine drug test
relapse	return to use/recurrence
non-compliant/bombed out	chooses not to at this point
needle exchange	syringe services
addicted mom/dad	caregiver with a substance use disorder
addicted baby	baby with prenatal exposure to substances/ baby experiencing neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)/neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (NOWS)
medication is a crutch	medication is a treatment tool
Incarceration	
prisoner/inmate/detainee/offender	person who is incarcerated/person who is in contact with, involved in, or interacting with the criminal legal system
convict/felon/criminal/thug	person with convictions
Mental Health	
crazy/insane/psycho/mentally ill/ emotionally disturbed	person with a mental illness/person with a mental health condition

Adapted and updated 3/28/22 from National Council for Behavioral Health. Toolkit for the Surgeon General's Report on Addiction, <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/surgeon-general-toolkit/language-matters/>

Terms that may be okay to use with some populations **Terms that are inclusive to a variety of populations and experiences**

Inclusive language is a way of acknowledging and respecting the diversity of peoples' bodies, genders, relationships, and experiences. Using inclusive language can support people to feel safe within the health system or community, and acknowledges who they are and what they have experienced.

Pregnancy and Parenting	
pregnant women/mother	pregnant person/birthing people/parent
breastfeeding	chest feeding, body feeding
mothering/fathering	parenting/caregiving
husband/wife	partner/spouse
fetal death, fetal demise	pregnancy loss

Adapted and updated 6/13/23 from National Institutes of Health: Inclusive and Gender-Neutral Language, <https://www.nih.gov.nih-style-guide/inclusive-gender-neutral-language>; and World Health Organization, Newsroom Spotlight, Why we need to talk about losing a baby, <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/why-we-need-to-talk-about-losing-a-baby>

Speaking Engagements

- Conference Brochures & Websites
- Submission & Proposal Guidelines
- Presentations & Handouts
- Keynote & Breakout Surveys

IPGGC Provider **Training Guidelines**

- The use of person first/nonstigmatizing language
- Potentially triggering gambling/gaming images should not be used without specific educational purpose
- Current diagnostic terminology should be used, ie., gambling disorder rather than pathological gambling, unless there is a specific reason such as quoting a source that uses pathological gambling.

Advocating Media Representation & Portrayal

- People are not a spectacle, a pet project, a scoop, or an advertisement. They are **PEOPLE**.
- Recording moments of consumption, congregation, intoxication, withdrawal, shame, etc. for the sake of “raising awareness” or “documenting the crisis” (while legally valid), are morally bankrupt.
- Peoples’ lives become weaponized against them.
- Stories need to be heard; but they need to be heard on the person’s terms and deserve media integrity.



Undoing Stigmatizing Language

Let **people choose** how they are described.

If you are not sure what words to use, **just ask!**

Avoid using language that **defines** someone by their condition.

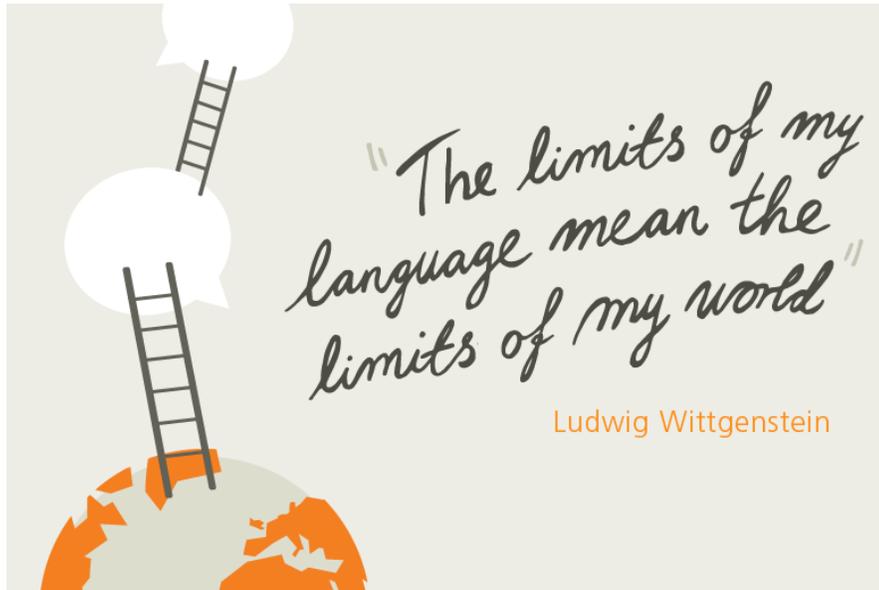
Avoid language that makes **judgments.**

Describe without downplaying or becoming overly graphic.

Use **updated, accurate** terminology.



How much of an **impact** does language have on someone's journey?



How we **talk** about someone is how we **treat** someone.



There were things I said years ago that I no longer agree with today. There were things I did years ago that I don't do anymore. No, I am not two faced, I am simply **growing and changing** as I should be. As we all should be.



We talk a lot about change in the people we work with; and I know that I'm talking about undoing stigmatizing language I'm asking **us to make changes.**

"Changing the language, we use around gambling, substance use, and mental health is not just about being politically correct. It's about creating a **path to healing**. Many of us have used stigmatizing language for a long time, often without realizing its impact. But when we shift our words, we **shift perceptions**, and that can **change everything** for someone seeking care. By making the effort to use nonjudgmental, person-first language, we create spaces where people **feel seen, valued, and supported**; rather than shamed or defined by their struggles. Small changes in how we speak can lead to big changes in how people **experience treatment, recovery, and hope.**"



ANY
QUESTIONS?

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Our Mission

Our mission is to help those who are suffering from substance use disorders. We consider these people our patients, and our singular aim is to help them heal. We're proud that our clinics provide our patients an environment that is free of judgment and condescension and we're steadfast in treating everyone with the utmost dignity and respect.

Our Vision

Leading the change to eliminate the consequences of substance use disorder in our communities.



Our Values

We see challenges as opportunities to demonstrate initiative.

We listen to and honor the reality of those we serve.

We are evangelists for practices grounded in science and evidence.

We value people who are passionate about making an impact.

Additional Resources for Changing Language

- Addiction Language Guide (Shatterproof):
<https://www.shatterproof.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Stigma-AddictionLanguageGuide-v3.pdf>
- Building Knowledge of Stigma Related to Gambling and Gambling Harms in Great Britain:
<https://www.gambleaware.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/GambleAware%20Stigma%20Final.pdf>
- Language Matters in Mental Health: <https://hogg.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Language-Matters-FINAL.pdf>
- What Words We Use – and Avoid – When Covering People and Incarceration:
<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2021/04/12/what-words-we-use-and-avoid-when-covering-people-and-incarceration>
- “Words Matter” when it comes to substance use – do images matter too? <https://www.recoveryanswers.org/research-post/words-matter-substance-use-do-images-matter/>

Word Replacements – Substance Use

Instead of	Say This
Junkie, Addict, Drunk, User, Abuser	Person with a substance use disorder (SUD)
Addicted to...	Has a substance use disorder (SUD)
Alcoholic, Drunk	Person with alcohol use disorder (AUD)
Clean	Substance-Free
Clean (toxicology)	Testing negative for substance use.
Dirty	Person who tests positive for substance use.
Dity (toxicology)	Testing positive for substance use.
Ex-addict/former addict	Person in recovery or person in long-term recovery
Drug Addicted Infant Addicted Baby Born Addicted	Baby with neonatal opioid withdrawal/neonatal abstinence syndrome; Newborn exposed to substances.
Relapse, Lapse, Slip	Returned to substance use Resume or experienced a reoccurrence Episode

“Language has an impact – it influences the way people feel, the way they think, the decisions they’re likely to make. We’re just asking people to modify the type of language they use so that we can set people up in our systems for **success**.”

Robert Ashford

Word Replacements – **Mental Health**

“If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

George Orwell

Instead of	Say This
Successful suicide	Died by suicide
Unsuccessful suicide	Suicide attempt
Unsuccessfully attempted suicide	Attempted suicide
Trauma victim	Trauma survivor
That person is crazy	Person seems to be distressed Person seems to be experiencing mental health challenges
That is nuts	That is interesting
Insane/disturbed	Individual with a mental health disorder/diagnosis.
Mental illness	Person living with a mental health challenge or person with a mental health disorder/diagnosis.

Word Replacements - **Violent Language**

Instead of	Say This
We're going to pull the trigger .	We're going to proceed .
I'll take a stab at it.	I'll take the first pass at.
Did we jump the gun ?	Did we start too soon ?
It'll bite the bullet .	I won't avoid it any longer.
That'll kill two birds with one stone.	That'll feed two birds with one scone.
What's the deadline ?	What's the due date ?
We must pick our battles .	We must choose our opportunities .
Can you shoot me an e-mail?	Can you send me an e-mail?
That was overkill .	That was a bit excessive .
I bombed the presentation.	I didn't do my best .

Instead of	Say This
Let's just roll with the punches.	Let's just move forward .
We can soften the blow by...	We can make it a little easier by...
I'm going to take a shot in the dark .	I'm going to take a guess .
Let's not beat a dead horse .	Let's not focus on that anymore.
I was blown away by the presentation	I was impressed by the presentation.
I was kicking around an idea.	I was thinking through an idea.
He's a straight shooter in meetings.	He's pretty direct in meetings.

Word Replacements – **Criminal Justice**

Instead of	Say This (people/person)
Felons	Convicted of felonies
Criminals, Convicts	Convicted of crimes.
Offenders or Perpetrators	Who have committed offenses.
Defendants	Accused of a crime.
“Worst of the worst”/Violent Offenders	Who have committed serious offenses.
Nonviolent Offenders	Who have committed less serious offenses.
Ex-Cons	Who have been incarcerated.
Parolees	On parole.
Sex Offenders	Convicted of a sex crime.
Juveniles	Children, young people.
Inmate	Who are incarcerated.

“Calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly what I can be.”

Eddie Ellis, a formerly incarcerated advocate and founder of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions