



Talking about Substance Use & Addiction

The U.S. is facing a significant opioid crisis. Since 2000, opioid overdoses have quadrupled. Approximately 11.5 million people mis-use prescription opioids, and 948,000 use heroin. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared the crisis a public health emergency.

Tips for talking about substance use disorders and addiction in supportive, solutions-based ways:

- Share the facts about what opioids do and how they alter a person's brain, body, and behavior to make it hard to stop without **ongoing** treatment and support.
 - Substance use disorders are complex diseases, and recovery usually takes more than good intentions or strong will.
 - Repeated alcohol and drug use can lead to brain changes that may challenge self-control and interfere with ability to resist intense urges.
 - People who begin to use substances before the age of 15 are 5 times more likely to develop substance use disorders.
 - Addiction to opioids is treatable and can be successfully managed.
- Use language that is person-centered, non-discriminatory, and not judgmental. While person first language can feel unwieldy, it communicates respect and is worth the effort.
 - Substance use disorders are chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and asthma.
 - People experiencing addiction and substance use disorders are people first—describe and refer to them using terms such as:
 - » Person with an active addiction or substance use disorder
 - » Person addicted to opiates
 - » Person in recovery
 - » Person abstaining from drugs/alcohol

Recovery is possible for everyone.

WORDS MATTER

“When you call me an addict, you take away everything that is lovely about me.”

—A man who was a son, father, partner, and friend and who died from a drug overdose; quoted by Alison Jones Webb, President of Nautilus Public Health

WORDS MATTER

“Words are important. If you want to care for something, you call it a ‘flower;’ if you want to kill something, you call it a ‘weed.’ ”

—Don Coyhis, Mohican Nation, Founder and President of White Bison, Inc

- Avoid words and phrases that can be stigmatizing and perpetuate prejudices and discrimination. Instead, use words that communicate empathy and give information.
 - Avoid abuser/addict/junkie—instead use substance use disorder, addiction, alcohol or drug problem, person with a substance use disorder, or person with an addiction.
 - Avoid clean/dirty—instead say person in active addiction or person who is abstaining from alcohol. If describing the outcome of a drug screen, use positive or negative screen.
 - Avoid dramatic language—instead don’t use dramatic verbs like “suffers from” and “afflicted with,” and limit the use of dramatic stories of recovering “super heroes.”
- Use images and videos that do not sensationalize, stereotype, and invade privacy.
 - Use positive images that reflect hope, strength, and resiliency.
 - » Don’t use photos and videos of people who are unconscious, needles, pills, ambulances, and the like as these images can have a triggering, stereotyping effect on people who are seeking or in treatment and recovery.
 - Use images of multiple people and faces. Addictions and substance use disorders occur in people in every state, county, city, and community at all ages, and within every socio-economic, gender, racial, and ethnic group and identity. About 25 million people are in stable remission (1 year or longer) from substance use disorders according to The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health.
 - If you see someone in distress, unresponsive, or not breathing, they are experiencing a medical emergency and cannot consent to being photographed or videotaped. Respect their privacy—do not take or share photos or videos of them, their children, or their friends and family. Call 9-1-1 if the person is unconscious or appears in need of medical assistance.

More Info:

- » [What is the U.S. Opioid Epidemic?](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- » [Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health](#) (U.S. Surgeon General)
- » [NIDA-Supported Researchers Use Brain Imaging to Deepen Understanding of Addiction](#) (National Institute on Drug Abuse)
- » [Opioid Overdose Prevention Toolkit](#) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration—SAMHSA)
- » [Decisions in Recovery: Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder](#) (SAMHSA)
- » [TIP 43: Medication-assisted Treatment for Opioid Addiction in Opioid Addiction Programs](#) (SAMHSA)
- » [Medication-Assisted Treatment \(MAT\)](#) (SAMHSA)
- » [Confronting Inadvertent Stigma and Pejorative Language in Addiction Scholarship](#) (Substance Abuse Journal)

Learn more about C4’s work to support wellness and recovery:

- [Behavioral Health and Recovery](#)
- [Opioid Overdose Prevention and Support](#)

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