

Letter to the editor: Changing to a person-centered

**Letter to the editor: Changing to a person-centered approach when referring to substance  
use clients**

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Dear Editor,

The substance use field is moving away from the word addict and towards a more person-centered approach by using the term substance user. Addressing the use of the term ‘addict’ is important as it is stigmatizing towards the clients seeking support. This is challenging for academics and treatment providers to adjust the language they use. While some clients incorporate “old-school terminology such as addict/alcoholic” (Hassett- Walker, 2023) into their recovery journey, as professionals it is our responsibility to use professional language and avoid such labels.

Research collected from participants of 12-Step Meetings by Hassett-Walker (2023) identified some individuals in recovery may choose to self-identify with the term ‘addict’ or ‘alcoholic’. While these findings provide a voice to the individuals in recovery, using first-person language places emphasis on the client/patient rather than their disorder (Dawkins & Daum, 2022). An example of using appropriate first-person language is a “person with a substance use disorder”. The National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA] (2021) provides guidelines on how the professional community can change the stigma associated with people affected by substance use/abuse disorders. NIDA recommends when professionals talk with or about a client affected

by a substance use disorder, they use first-person language as it separates the person from their disorder, it recognizes the client is more than just their diagnosis (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021).

A study conducted by van Boekel, Brouwers, van Weeghel and Garretsen (2013) identified that health care professionals often have negative attitudes towards clients with substance use issues. Moreover, those attitudes are recognized and internalized by clients, and it adversely affects their trust in the practitioner and reduces their sense of hope and recovery. Professionals in healthcare, human services, psychology, social work, and addiction treatment actively work to change terminology and use language that positively supports clients.

Sincerely,

Cailyn Green, Ph.D., CASAC-M

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