



## General Guidelines

- When speaking or writing about a person's mental illness or substance use disorder, use person-first language.
- Do not refer to a person's behavioral health diagnosis unless it is relevant to the conversation.
- Use "disability" rather than "handicap."
- Avoid referring to persons with mental illness or substance use disorders as "the disabled," "the impaired," "the mentally ill," "the retarded," or "those people."
- Descriptive terms should be used as adjectives, not nouns.
- Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's behavioral health disorder. Don't say "suffers from," "a victim of," or "afflicted with." These descriptions elicit unwanted sympathy or pity toward the people being described.
- Don't use "normal" to describe people who do not have mental illness or substance use disorders. It is better to say "people without mental illness" or "people without substance use disorders," if necessary, to make comparisons.
- Use language that focuses on strength.
- Overall, be respectful. Treat a person with the respect you would want to receive.



## About ACCR

Allegheny County Coalition for Recovery (ACCR) was created by persons with lived experience with mental illness and/or substance use disorders, family members, and providers. ACCR was created in response to service users who felt that they were not being heard by providers and seldom had opportunities to participate in the planning of their treatment.

ACCR strives to transform systems of care in Allegheny County to systems that are more supportive of each person who has mental health or substance use disorders.

ACCR's mission is to increase awareness of behavioral health recovery and to promote the use of recovery principles in practices in behavioral health services.



[www.coalitionforrecovery.org](http://www.coalitionforrecovery.org)



# Words Matter!

## A Guide for Using Person-First Language



**Allegheny County Coalition  
for Recovery (ACCR)**

[www.coalitionforrecovery.org](http://www.coalitionforrecovery.org)

412.350.4166

[ACCR.Information@gmail.com](mailto:ACCR.Information@gmail.com)



## Recovery

Recovery is a process. It is a personal journey of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness. A key aspect of recovery is overcoming stereotypes and stigma.

Everyone encounters challenges. However, challenges are even more significant when people face stigma and discrimination based on their health status, as often do persons with mental health or substance use disorders.

## Words Matter



### Why use person-first language?

People who are in recovery from mental illness and substance use disorders are present in every aspect of society. They are:

- Moms and dads, sons and daughters
- Employees and employers
- Friends and neighbors
- 1 out of 4 Americans during their lifetime. 1 out of 4 of us!

*Most importantly, they are people first.*

One way to combat the stereotypes and stigma often associated with mental illness and substance use disorders is to use person-first language.



## Choosing to Use Person-First Language

When talking about people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders, the guiding principle is to refer to the person first, not the illness.

In all aspects of communication, the emphasis should be on the person, not the illness.

Examples of person-first language:

“People in recovery” or “people who have mental illness” or “people with lived experience” rather than “the mentally ill”

“She is diagnosed with alcohol dependence” or “substance use disorder” rather than “she is an alcoholic”

“Accessible” parking or bathrooms not “handicapped” parking or bathrooms

“He has been diagnosed with an intellectual disability” rather than “he is MR”

Person-first language replaces language that can conquer hope. Hope is essential to moving forward and accomplishing goals.



## Terms to Avoid:



Many labels used for mental illness and substance use disorders in our society have negative connotations or are misleading. Using labels contributes to negative stereotypes and stigma. The terms above are just some of the many labels that devalue the person they attempt to describe and could affect his or her self-esteem. *Such language is so damaging it can crush attempts to nurture or otherwise support recovery.*

There is some debate about which terms are most appropriate to use when describing persons with mental illness or substance use disorders... *Regardless of the terms you use or the settings you are in, be respectful and always use person-first language.*