

How to Use Stigma-Free Language

A Simple, Everyday Guide



What Is Stigma-Free Language?

Stigma-free language helps people feel **respected, believed, and safe** to share their experiences.

You do not need perfect words — you need **care, curiosity, and awareness**.

Using Stigma Free Language will:

- ★ Reduces shame
- ★ Encourages openness
- ★ Builds trust
- ★ Avoids blame or judgement

Before You Speak: A Quick Check-In

Ask yourself:

- ☐ **Am I listening** — or trying to fix it?
- ☐ **Am I asking** — or assuming?
- ☐ **Am I acknowledging** — or minimizing?



Person-First Language: Why It Matters

Person-first language puts the person before the condition, diagnosis, or experience.

It reminds us that someone is **more than one part of their story**.

Why this matters:

Person-first language keeps dignity and humanity at the centre.

DO	DON'T
✓ Person with a substance use disorder.	✗ "Addict," "junkie,"
✓ Died by suicide.	✗ "Committed suicide."
✓ Person experiencing homelessness.	✗ "Homeless person"
✓ Person living with HIV.	✗ "HIV-positive person" (as primary label)

 **Note:** Some communities prefer identity-first language. When in doubt, **ask and follow the person's lead**.

Language to Avoid

Avoid phrases like the ones mentioned on the right. These phrases can minimize pain and shut down honest conversation.



Stigma-Free Language to Use Instead

💡 Try saying:

- ★ "That sounds really hard."
- ★ "I'm glad you told me."
- ★ "I believe you."
- ★ "Do you want support or just someone to listen?"
- ★ "What feels most helpful right now?"



If You're Not Sure What to Say

You can say:

- "I don't have the perfect words, but I care."
- "I'm here with you."

💡 Presence is often more helpful than advice.

If You've Already Said the Wrong Thing

☀️ Repair builds trust.

You can say:

- ★ "I've been thinking about what I said earlier."
- ★ "That may have come across as dismissive."
- ★ "I'm sorry — can I try again?"

💡 Reflection

What labels do I hear most often?

Which phrases feel easiest for me to fall back on?

What's one small language shift I could do?

Remember

You do not need to fix or solve.
You can listen, believe, and stay present.

That is how stigma is reduced — one conversation at a time.

Stories Against Stigma

www.storiesagainststigma.ca