

# Words with Respect & Compassion

What we say and do can help improve the health and wellbeing of a person who uses substances



*Excellent health and care for everyone,  
everywhere and every time*

## What we say and do can help improve the health and wellbeing of a person who uses substances.

There's only one chance to make a first impression. Health care providers are often the first point of contact for people experiencing injury or illness, including people who have a relationship with substances. The words we choose may be the start of a positive dialogue with individuals and families seeking our help. The words we use can also have the opposite effect – judgement, blame, nagging, shame, and guilt close opportunities for dialogue.

Remember to:

- Have **Courage: explore** personal values and beliefs related to substances and reflect on how this may influence your practice
- **Aspire to understand:** avoid jargon, confusing data or speculation – be clear and concise – and strive to hear the ideas and hopes of the people we serve
- **Show Respect:** value each person and bring trust to every relationship
- **Offer Empathy:** give the kind of care and attention we would want for our loved ones

Ask people how they would like to be addressed: first name, preferred pronoun, nickname or formally (i.e. Ms. Wilson or Ace).

Ask people what they would like you to understand about their needs. Treat every encounter as a new opportunity.

If you feel distressed by a situation, take a minute to collect your thoughts and calm yourself. Ask a colleague for help if you need it.

Please consider that people may present in challenging ways. Their behaviour is often an adaptation, trauma response or coming from an unmet need. The behaviour should not define who you believe the person is.

### From PEEP – The BC provincial peer working group:

Healthcare providers have a responsibility to use appropriate language that will positively influence the public discourse outside and within the community of people who use substances to reduce stigma around pain management and substance use. The language we use influences all stakeholders: the public, healthcare providers, those who use substances and those with substance use disorders.

Words with Respect	Words to Avoid
<p><b>George uses substances</b></p> <p><b>George has been sleeping outside since...</b></p>	<p>George is an addict</p> <p>George is homeless</p>
Words with Respect	Words to Avoid
<p><b>Jen lives with mental health challenges</b></p> <p><b>Jen is living with a bipolar disorder</b></p> <p><b>Jen has an eating disorder</b></p>	<p>Jen is mentally ill</p> <p>Jen is bipolar</p> <p>Jen is anorexic</p>
<p><b>Bill does not want to take his medication</b></p> <p><b>Bill's mental health symptoms are getting worse</b></p>	<p>Bill is resistant, non-compliant</p> <p>Bill is decompensating</p>
<p><b>Ms. Wilson believes we aren't meeting her needs</b></p> <p><b>Ms. Wilson has asked for more support with...</b></p>	<p>Ms. Wilson is manipulative</p> <p>Ms. Wilson has challenging and/or complex behaviours</p>
<p><b>Mr. Phelps does not agree with our care plan</b></p> <p><b>Mr. Phelps is currently not interested in and understands the risks of ...</b></p>	<p>Mr. Phelps is non-compliant</p> <p>Mr. Phelps lacks insight, makes poor choices</p>
<p><b>Ace is excited about the plan we've developed together</b></p> <p><b>Ace is working hard toward their goals</b></p>	<p>Ace is manageable</p> <p>Ace has insight</p>
<p><b>Charles asked for medication and we need to understand why</b></p> <p><b>Charles wants a new plan and we need to know what will work for him</b></p> <p><b>Charles wants to be a part of his treatment plan</b></p>	<p>Charles is drug-seeking</p> <p>Charles is resistant to treatment</p>

## What else can you do to provide culturally safe and harm reduction friendly care?

**Culturally safe care is based on the principle that people receiving care have a strong influence on what is considered safe or unsafe.**

- ✓ **Provide naloxone kits to people you are supporting and their chosen family**
- ✓ **Use pronouns that the person uses**
- ✓ **Respond to an overdose by giving rescue breaths and administering naloxone**
- ✓ **Consider how past histories and enduring racism, trauma and violence, layers of disadvantage and stigma may affect peoples' ability to engage with providers and care plans**
- ✓ **Consider that people's health, priorities and experience are influenced by history and policies that criminalize drug use**
- ✓ **Focus on building trust and relationship**
- ✓ **All people are valuable and deserving of care**
  - **See link to reference article below (Creating Culturally Safe Care)**

Treatment is available. Recovery is a unique journey for each person. We can all work together to better support people who are using substances. [Please share these tips!](#)

For more information, tools and resources search [SUPPORT PATIENTS](#) on the intranet.

## Helpful resources

- **Creating Culturally Safe Care** <http://bit.ly/safe-care-cisur>
- **Toward the Heart** [www.towardtheheart.com](http://www.towardtheheart.com)
- **Respectful Language and Stigma** <http://bit.ly/language-matters-bccdc>
- **BCCDC Language Guide (See Substance Use section p.15)** <http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Language-guide.pdf>

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