

The language we choose when we talk about substance use matters

5 January 2021, by Kara Fletcher



How we talk to — and talk about — people who use substances is often pathologizing and hurtful. Credit: Shutterstock

When Hunter Biden, son of President-elect Joe Biden, was recently [interviewed by Amy Robach at ABC News](#), Robach brought up Hunter's substance use issues, noting that he had been "in and out of rehab seven, eight times."

Hunter responded, "Say it nicer to me." He went on to correct Robach's language, saying that he had "sought treatment for an issue, like most people" and noted that the interviewer was "insensitive."

What was surprising about this exchange was sadly not what Robach said, but that Hunter Biden challenged it.

As a researcher who studies the lived experiences of individuals with substance use issues, I am frequently disheartened by the words chosen to talk about substance use treatment and people who use drugs.

The language used when talking to or about people who use [substances](#) is often hurtful. Instead of recognizing and understanding the chronic relapsing nature of addiction, this language regards individuals who struggle with substance

use as morally reprehensible.

Negative language

Terminology such as, "addict," "junkie" and "abuser" continue to be commonplace. In Hunter Biden's case, the interviewer's characterization was that his multiple episodes of treatment indicated a personal failure.

Negative language about individuals who use substances contributes to how society views these individuals. For example, [one study had clinicians read case vignettes](#) that either used the term "substance abuser" or "[substance use disorder](#)." The clinicians who read the "substance abuser" vignettes were more likely to conclude that the character in the vignette was personally culpable, and were more likely to support punitive treatment for the character.

I recently completed a study for which I interviewed 10 individuals attending outpatient treatment for substance use and 10 clinicians providing outpatient counseling.

I asked all of the participants how they perceived language around substance use, particularly as it related to relapse and recovery. I heard multiple stories of how disempowering the language around substance use can be, and how many of the participants who struggled with substance addictions felt judged and misunderstood by broader society.

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