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## Sub-Theme 6: Specialization in Social Work Practice

### Words Matter: Substance Use Disorders and the Importance of Non-Stigmatizing Language

Jessica Lareau and MaryRose Kline

McLean Hospital, USA

[jlareau2@partners.org](mailto:jlareau2@partners.org)

#### Abstract

The Surgeons General Report states that stigma is the most formidable obstacle to recovery and treatment for Substance Use Disorders (SUDs). Common terms, such as addicts and alcoholics, propagate stigma by implying willful misconduct. Stigma can lead to moralization and criminalization of SUDs which disproportionately harm people of colour and that low-income populations. Stigmatization language conveys that a person “is” the problem; conversely, clinically appropriate language asserts a person's agency, separate from a diagnosis (Kelly et al., 2016). When stigmatizing language is used, people with SUDs have better treatment engagement and outcomes (Luoma et al., 2014). Provider attitudes and biases are influenced by their preparedness (Phelan & Borne, 2008). Stigma tends to decrease after education or mass media interventions (Ahrens et al., 2011). Social work students who receive training in substance use report increased confidence in their knowledge and skills, and more positive perceptions of patients with SUDs (Galvani & Henggeler, 2010). In MSW programs, content on SUDs is minimal compared to the need for this training (Minnick, 2019). SUD stigma – the idea that people with SUDs do not deserve intervention – can cause marginalization of addiction training within social work curricula (Chahine et al., 2013). Social work educators have key roles in teaching and modelling the use of non-stigmatization language when referring to people with SUDs. Across practice settings, social workers serve people impacted by SUDs and should use clinically appropriate terminology. The ASWEK conference has the potential of bringing social workers together to develop sustainable goals and promote justice in social work education and practice. By using person-centred, strengths-based language, social workers can counter biases about SUDs. It is an act of social and racial justice to resist moralization and criminalizing this disorder and recognizes that stigma exacerbates disparities in access to treatment. The workshop describes social work students' knowledge and perceptions of SUDs and examines their understanding of the impact of stigmatizing and non-stigmatizing language.

**Keywords:** non-stigmatizing language, social workers, Substance Use Disorders

