

Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones and Words Can Break My Heart: Stigma, Shame and the Importance of Language

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Why Words Matter

- ▶ *Words are important. If you want to care for something, you call it a “flower”; if you want to kill something, you call it a “weed.”*

--Don Coyhis

- ▶ Watch your thoughts for they become words, watch your words for they become actions, watch your actions, for they become habits, watch your habits for they become your character, watch your character for it becomes your destiny.

Attributed to:

Buddha, Emerson, Lao Tzu,
Ghandi, Margaret Thatcher
Etc

WHY ARE SELF HELP
GROUPS FOR
THOSE WITH
ADDICTIVE
DISORDERS AND
THEIR CONCERNED
OTHERS
ANONYMOUS?

Question



The Gambling Nuns of Torrance, California

- ▶ Thou shalt not steal...unless you're one of the Vegas-loving nuns who allegedly took the Catholic school under their watch for every penny they could. A Southern California community reckons with an altogether new form of churchly hypocrisy.

Language of Addiction



- ▶ "These are issues, and these are words that have a dramatic impact on both clinical care and about how medical professionals actually see and treat people with addiction."

Michael Botticelli

Starting Point

No one is bad

None should be defined as the sum total of our worst actions

None of us is an offender, liar, betrayer, or monster

We are all fragile and flawed humans who may lie or steal or betray

When we do these things, we are not monsters; we are human beings who have become separated from our own goodness

- Desmond and Mpho Tutu, 2014

Exercise

How have you been “labeled”

How do you label yourself?

Labels

Little old grey-haired lady

Petite, silver-haired older woman



The Importance of Language

What words have you heard/seen clinicians, researchers, advocates, those in recovery use to describe their clients, subjects, themselves etc?

Terms Used to Describe a Person with a Gambling Disorder

Liar

Manipulator

Con-man/woman

Irresponsible

Immature

Research on stigma and gambling disorder (Hing et al, 2016)

- ▶ Dan is a man who lives in your community. During the last 12 months, he has started to gamble more than his usual amount of money. He has even noticed that he needs to gamble much more than he used to in order to get the same feeling of excitement. Several times, he has tried to cut down, or stop gambling, but he can't. Each time he has tried to cut down, he became agitated and couldn't sleep, so he gambled again. He is often preoccupied by thoughts of gambling and gambles more to try to recover his losses. Dan has also lied to his family and friends about the extent of his gambling

How Dan was Rated

Impulsive

Irresponsible

Irrational

Foolish

Untrustworthy

Unproductive

Greedy

Antisocial

Stereotypes of Problem Gamblers (Horch & Hodgins, 2013)

Both terms problem gambler and gambling addict had same negative stereotypes

The term gambler also has same associations – only somewhat less negative than terms problem gambler and gambling addict



Recovery Dialects

The words we use matter.



Positive

Person who uses substances



Recurrence of Use

Pharmacotherapy



Accidental Drug Poisoning

Person with a Substance Use Disorder



Negative

Substance Abuser

Relapse

Medication-Assisted Treatment

Overdose

Addict

Alcoholic

Opioid Addict

Language Matters

While some negative language is okay to use in mutual aid meetings, its use should be avoided in public, when advocating and in journalism.

Problem Gambling Recovery, Person First Language

Non-stigmatizing

- ▶ Person experiencing gambling problems
- ▶ Person with a gambling disorder
- ▶ Recurrence of gambling
- ▶ Person in recovery/meeting recovery goals

Stigmatizing

- ▶ Problem Gambler
- ▶ Compulsive Gambler
- ▶ Disordered Gambler/Addict
- ▶ Relapse
- ▶ Clean

Power of Labels: Othering

- ▶ Shunning
- ▶ I am outcast
- ▶ I am excluded
- ▶ I am not deserving
- ▶ I am not part of a common humanity

Changing Language Not Just a “Polite” Thing to do



Terminology can imply that problem gambling is a result of a personal failure – Problem Gambling caused by “bad character”



Research shows that people with a gambling disorder are viewed negatively

Perilous
Non-recoverable
Disruptive



Most respondents were unwilling to socialize with Dan

Lessons from Opioid Use Disorder Research

(Kelly et al., 2020)

- ▶ No one single term can reduce all potential stigma biases
- ▶ Medical terminology (ie., brain disease, chronically relapsing brain disease)
 - ▶ Reduced ratings of personal blame
 - ▶ Decreased ratings that such person could recover
 - ▶ Increased perceptions of dangerousness and person should be socially excluded
- ▶ Non-medical terminology (individual having an opioid problem)
 - ▶ Increased perception that person was to blame for problem
 - ▶ But simultaneously rated recovery as more likely
 - ▶ And that the person wasn't dangerous and did not need to be socially excluded

Language Recommendations

Language that emphasizes hope and recovery



Language that respects individual autonomy and choice, self-efficacy, and multiple pathways



Language and stories that humanize gambling disorder

Avoid fear and blame that portray those who are suffering as “other”

What do family
members hear
when reach out
(often at point
of despair,
overwhelm,
confusion,
hopelessness?)

You are doing too much

You are an enabler

You are a co-dependent

You need to kick them out

You need to give tough love

Let them hit bottom

Set boundaries

Detach

Basic Message – You are doing something wrong

Language Recommendations for Loved Ones/Concerned Others

Stigmatizing (unhelpful) language	More helpful language
Co-Dependent	Person who has a loved one with an addiction
Enabling	Using unhelpful ways to respond to addictive behavior/Behaviors that reinforce excessive gambling
Tough love	Courageous/Firm Compassion Allowing natural consequences
Detachment	Equanimity and self-compassion

Families and stigmatizing language

- ▶ “What we don’t talk about enough is the reality is that it is normal to try and be helpful when someone you love is hurting themselves. It’s normal to want to protect people we love from consequences of their behavior, especially when the outcome might be public humiliation, shame and even incarceration or death.”
- ▶ Wilkens & Foote (2019)

Language for Gambling without Harms

Responsible gambling? Implies
Irresponsible gambling

A light orange arrow pointing downwards from the first box to the second box.

Recreational/social gambling
or low risk gambling

A light yellow arrow pointing downwards from the second box to the third box.

Safe gambling? Healthy
gambling?

Policy Implications

Focus on Products

Mandatory limit setting

Speed of games

Percentage of “losses disguised as wins” or near misses

Use of “stop” button

Hours of operation

Availability

▶ Focus on individual

▶ Information on how odds

▶ Information on how games work

▶ Treatment

▶ Prevention messages

▶ Personalized feedback

▶ Voluntary, non-binding limits

One Thing

1

That was
validated for you

2

That you learned
or challenged
you

3

That you will
implement or do
differently

Resources

- ▶ Community Reinforcement and Family Therapy Manual
www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/docs/CRAFT-SP_Final.pdf
- ▶ Center for Motivation and Change: <https://motivationandchange.com/online-and-in-print-resources/>
- ▶ Hing N et al., (2016) Unpacking the public stigma of problem gambling: the process of stigma creation and predictors of social distancing. *J of Behav Addict*, 5, 448-456.
- ▶ Kelly JF et al (2020) A US national randomized study to guide how best to reduce stigma when describing drug-related impairment in practice and policy. *Addiction*.
- ▶ Miller H et al., (2018) From problem people to addictive products: a qualitative study on rethinking gambling policy from the perspective of lived experience. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 15.
- ▶ Myers, RJ & Wolfe, BL, Beyond Addiction: How Science and Kindness Help People Change.
- ▶ Palmer BA et al., (2018) Public stigma and the label of gambling disorder: does it make a difference. *J of Gambl Stud*, 34, 1281-91.
- ▶ SMART Recovery Friends and Family Handbook. www.smartrecovery.org

Thank You



*Anyone can slay a dragon,
he told me, but try waking up
every morning and loving the
world all over again.
That's what takes a real hero.*