



OVERDOSE RESPONSE MESSAGING GUIDE

It is important to provide effective communication regarding overdose prevention strategies when our community experiences overdose events or overdose clusters. This can raise awareness of the importance of prevention and encourage people who are using drugs to practice safe use or to seek treatment for substance misuse or substance use disorder.

This guide provides practical tips for our community stakeholders to use when developing messaging for communicating about overdose prevention, treatment and recovery in our community.

Building a narrative of hope and resilience

Public health communications help create narratives or stories about substance use/misuse, overdose, and overdose prevention. These narratives can influence how people react, think, and feel regarding these topics.

Words matter. Often, messaging shared about overdoses or substance use is sensationalized or stigmatized with unintentional consequences. The increased stigma can decrease the likelihood that those in need will seek help.

Many times, public messaging focuses on the problems of substance use/misuse and overdose. Unfortunately, this may discourage people from help-seeking behaviors because they feel they are adding to the problem. Building narratives of hope and resilience can help to change public perception. This results in community awareness that substance use disorder and overdose is preventable, recovery is possible, and help is available.

How can I contribute to positive messaging?

A positive narrative is the main objective of positive messaging. Successful communication is not about having predefined messages or particular words.

Positive narratives might include:

- Helplines and information on support services and programs like syringe service programs
- Concrete and realistic actions a particular audience can take to prevent overdose
- Personal stories of coping, resilience, and recovery
- Advocate for individuals to attend recovery meetings

Language to use

The words we choose when talking about substance use/misuse and overdose are important. They can help prevent stigma, as well as shape other people's perceptions about substance use/misuse and overdose. All of the suggested language below is recommended with the goal of reducing stigma around these topics.

Please keep in mind that individuals in recovery or those currently using substances may use language that does not align with the guidance below. Those in recovery or with current substance use/misuse may find empowerment or comfort in identification with certain terms used to describe themselves. However, general messaging should avoid stigmatizing language.

AVOID USING	USE INSTEAD
Drug abuse or substance abuse	<i>For illicit drugs:</i> Substance use <i>For prescription medications:</i> Substance misuse; substance use other than prescribed
Addict, junkie, drug abuser	Person with substance use disorder
Former addict, reformed addict	Person in recovery; person in long-term recovery; person who previously used drugs
Addicted to (name of substance)	Has substance use disorder
Clean	<i>For toxicology results:</i> testing negative <i>For non-toxicology purposes:</i> abstinent; in recovery, substance-free; not currently or actively using substances
Dirty	<i>For toxicology results:</i> testing positive <i>For non-toxicology purposes:</i> actively using (X) substance
Opioid substitution; opioid replacement therapy	Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT)*-not being used as much currently Medication Assisted Therapy Medication Assisted Recovery Medication Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) Opioid Agonist Therapy
Habit or drug habit	Substance use disorder Compulsive or regular substance use
Methadone clinic	Opioid Treatment Program (OTP)
Recreational, experimental or casual users	People who use substances or drugs for non-medical reasons People starting to use substances/drugs People new to substance use/drug use
Sensationalized words: Examples- “opioid epidemic” “skyrocketing rates” “alarming”	Non-sensationalized words: Examples- “increasing overdose rates” “rising” “higher”
Negative words that may add blame or stigma: Examples: “troubling overdose rates” “problematic” “disturbing trend”	Words of empathy and care: Examples: “Concerning overdose rates” “the trend is worrisome, and we are taking steps to improve prevention efforts”

Preventable deaths of suicide and substance use/misuse

With suicide as the leading cause of death for those with a substance use disorder diagnosis, it is important to consider this overlap and the ways in which both topics are discussed and presented (SAMHSA, 2016). Some overdose deaths are accidental, while others may be intentional. There are multiple factors that play into suicide and substance use/misuse and language should reflect the complexity of both topics. Considering the impact of messaging around both topics can prevent harm and stigmatization of those with lived or loss experience.

Framing suicide and overdose deaths as preventable allows a shift in focus from negative and hopeless to action-oriented and hopeful. This type of messaging ties directly to the mission and vision of All4Knox, to decrease the impact of substance use/misuse through community-level change and a coordinated response.

Using photos, graphic, and colors in messaging

Images, colors, and design choices are also important in shaping the narrative in our messaging. Images associated with substance use/misuse and overdose often focus on the problem and convey hopelessness, despair, and inevitability.

A better practice is to focus on people enjoying life or connecting with others for help. Think of this as showing a *positive result* of overdose prevention efforts. Images of people enjoying life or getting help can remind audiences of what we are trying to achieve together, or where they can go for help.

Avoid using images with:

- Stock photos of injection drug use or people using drugs
- Pill bottles, photos of pills or alcohol, or drug paraphernalia
- People in isolation, despair, or depression
- Dark or threatening colors or branding

Use images with (check for licensing and permission):

- People looking optimistically to the sky
- People connecting to other people in an optimistic manner
 - Be sure to evaluate images for diversity and inclusion
 - Be sure to evaluate images for people for following social distancing guidelines during COVID-19, i.e. no large groups of people without masks
- Bright, calming, and/or uplifting colors