



Promoting Recovery-Focused Language

Once an individual is known to be struggling with addiction, all that they've ever been and might ever become is (in the eyes of our society) reduced to a single label; a label that de-humanizes and stigmatizes. No longer are they seen as a son or daughter, parent, sibling, colleague, student, etc. For all intents and purposes, the very essence of who they are, their experiences and their accomplishments are forgotten. They are simply perceived to be alcoholics and/or addicts.

In a recent Huffington Post blog, addiction policy expert, filmmaker (“The Anonymous People”), activist, social entrepreneur Greg Williams addresses this very subject. He writes about the power of language to “create a perceptual underclass of nearly 20 percent of American adults (22 million suffering and 23 million others in recovery)’ by labeling them as addicts or alcoholics. “It’s no surprise,” he continues, “a significant portion of those in need of help don’t reach out for it.”

Contrary to what has been said about sticks and stones, words can and do hurt; but they can also heal. It all depends on which we use. They can convey shame and feelings of hopelessness and unworthiness – all of which can contribute to struggling individuals and their families choosing not to seek help. Conversely, they can inspire hope, promise, healing and new beginnings. Thus, we must choose our words carefully.

We will never succeed in conquering the addiction crisis unless we stop labeling those struggling with addiction as “alcoholics” and “addicts” and begin regarding them as people with a chronic disease. When we do, we’ll stop de-humanizing them, we’ll erase the stigma and make it easier for those individuals and their families to seek, find, and sustain recovery.

Adopting recovery-focused language can change the way our lawmakers and society as a whole perceive the disease of addiction. The right language can serve not only to increase understanding of addiction and recovery, but also to make recovery attractive and attainable.

In “The Language of Recovery Advocacy,” (June 7, 2014) William White writes, “It is time people in recovery rejected imposed language and laid claim to words that adequately convey the nature of our experience, strength, and hope. We must forge a new vocabulary that humanizes AOD (Alcohol and Other Drug) problems and widens the doorways of entry into recovery. We must forever banish language that, by objectifying and demonizing addiction, sets the stage for our sequestration and punishment. We must counter the clinical language that reduces human beings to diagnostic labels that pigeonhole our pathologies while ignoring our strengths and resiliencies. We must also reject the disrespectful and demeaning epithets (e.g. retreads, frequent flyers) professionals sometimes use to castigate those who need repeated treatment episodes. ”

Change is occurring; albeit slowly. Friends of Recovery – New York is promoting a new and positive way for those in recovery to talk about themselves. Originally created by Faces & Voices of Recovery, the language begins as follows: My name is _____ and I am a person in long term recovery. What that means for me is that I haven’t had to pick up a drink or drug in ___ years. As a result, I’ve been able to (mention a few gifts of your recovery).

Change is also happening within New York agencies as evidenced by the NYS Office of Alcoholism & Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) Commissioner Gonzalez-Sanchez’s remarks at the recent Alcohol and Substance Abuse Providers (ASAP) Conference in Saratoga during which she mentioned OASAS would be moving away from the terms “behavioral health” and “substance abuser” so as to emphasize the importance of addressing addiction as the disease it is and not leave room for lesser interpretations.

It is up to us, as the champions of the recovery community, the living proof of recovery’s power, the friends, families and allies united together, to take the first crucial step toward effecting this needed change. A scale of change that will shift the larger societal perspective of the struggle of millions. That first step begins with our own language; the very words we use to describe ourselves and our journeys.

To that end, FOR-NY is working within existing and emerging recovery community organizations to bring the “Our Stories Have Power” messaging workshops to the front lines. We need to empower and equip our champions to carry recovery-focused language into all of our conversations.

