



Talking about Substance Use with Patients

A CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR PROVIDERS

Use neutral, person-centered language when speaking with patients about substance use. Avoid stigmatizing language.

Avoid Stigmatizing Language

Addict, junkie, substance abuser, tecato/a

Substance abuse

Replacement/substitution therapy, Medications for addiction treatment (MAT)

Clean or dirty urine

Use Neutral, Person-Centered Language:

Person who uses (or injects) drugs

Substance use

Medications for Opioid Use Disorder, Opioid Agonist Treatment (when referencing buprenorphine and methadone)

Negative or positive urine

Clinical training regarding substance use often focuses on motivational interviewing and informing patients of the dangers of substance use – in order to encourage abstinence. This approach can backfire and, instead of eliciting the desired behavior change, patients may feel alienated and leave regretting their decision to share. A harm reduction orientation asks providers to instead focus on building trust, developing the therapeutic relationship, and finding mutually beneficial goals. This means that conversations should be used as an opportunity to learn about your patient, their motivations for use, and their goals for their own health. This will help you to find common ground and create a non-judgmental foundation for discussing their substance use and strategies for safer drug use.

An example of a mutually beneficial goal is that the provider and patient would both like to maintain the patient's oral health. The provider and patient can discuss how a mouthpiece can be used to prevent burns, sugar-free gum can encourage saliva production to prevent tooth decay, and lip balm can be used to prevent dry, cracked lips. Preventing burns and dry, cracked lips can reduce risk of hepatitis C and HIV transmission. Similarly, the provider and patient may both like to improve sleep hygiene. A conversation about use patterns can identify strategies to decrease episodes of being awake for long durations of time.

Focus on using questions like:

“What are your health concerns right now?”

“How are you feeling about your cocaine use?”

“What steps do you take to keep yourself safe when using?”

“Do you have naloxone (Narcan) available in the case of an overdose?”

“What do you like about smoking crack?”

“Is there anything you don't like about injecting cocaine?”

“Walk me through a typical day for you. When do you usually use?”

“Have you noticed times when you use more or less than usual? What are those?”