

# Overdose Cluster Response Messaging

## A GUIDE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND PREVENTION ORGANIZATIONS

When a community experiences an overdose cluster, effectively communicating about overdose prevention strategies can help raise awareness of their importance and encourage people who are using drugs to practice safe use or seek treatment for substance misuse or substance use disorder. This guide provides practical tips for public health agencies and other prevention organizations to use when developing messaging to communicate about potential overdose clusters.

### Building a narrative of hope and resilience

Public health communications help create stories or narratives about substance use/misuse, overdose, and overdose prevention. This narrative can influence how people think, feel, and act regarding the topic.

Words matter. Often, messaging is shared about certain details related to substance use and overdose clusters that can have unintended consequences. It can increase stigma around substance use and decrease the likelihood that those in need will seek help.

Too often, public messaging focuses on the problem of substance use/misuse and overdose. This can discourage people from help-seeking behaviors, because they may feel they are adding to the problem. Building a narrative of hope and resilience can help change public perception to one that believes that substance use disorder and overdose are preventable, recovery is possible, and help is available.

Focusing on the positive does not mean hiding the tragedy of overdose or never talking about overdose as a problem. Rather, the goal is to increase the likelihood that the public will also receive positive and helpful messages of substance use disorder and overdose prevention. In turn, this can decrease stigma and increase support for those who may be at risk of overdose.

### How can I contribute to a positive narrative?

A positive narrative is an overarching theme, not a predefined message or particular language.

Positive narratives might include:

- Helplines and information on support services and programs
- Concrete and realistic actions that a particular audience can take to prevent overdose
- Examples of effective substance use or overdose prevention efforts or program accomplishments
- Personal stories of coping, resilience, and recovery
- Stories of people reaching out for help and receiving it.

## Language to use

The language used when talking about substance use/misuse and overdose can help prevent overdoses and shape perceptions around substance use and overdose. All suggested language in the table below is recommended with the goal of reducing stigma around these topics.

### Dos and don'ts of substance use and overdose language

Do not use	Do use
Drug abuse or substance abuse	<p><b><i>For illicit drugs:</i></b> Use</p> <p><b><i>For prescription medications:</i></b> Misuse, used other than prescribed</p>
Addict, junkie, drug abuser	Person with substance use disorder
Former addict, reformed addict	Person in recovery or long-term recovery, person who previously used drugs
Addicted to (name of substance)	Has substance use disorder
Dirty	<p><b><i>For toxicology screen results:</i></b> Testing positive</p> <p><b><i>For non-toxicology testing purposes:</i></b> Actively using X substance</p>
Clean	<p><b><i>For toxicology screen results:</i></b> Testing negative</p> <p><b><i>For non-toxicology testing purposes:</i></b> Abstinent, in recovery, substance-free, not currently or actively using drugs</p>
Opioid substitution, opioid replacement therapy	Medication-assisted treatment (MAT), medication treatment for OUD (MOUD), opioid agonist therapy
Habit or drug habit	Substance use disorder, compulsive or regular substance use

Do not use	Do use
Methadone clinic	Opioid Treatment Program (OTP)
Recreational, casual, or experimental users (as opposed to those with a substance use disorder)	People who use drugs for non-medical reasons, people starting to use drugs, or people who are new to drug use
Sensationalized words <i>Examples:</i> “opioid epidemic” “skyrocketing rates” “alarming”	Non-sensational words <i>Examples:</i> “increasing/decreasing rates” “rising” “higher”
Negative words that blame or add stigma <i>Examples:</i> “troubling overdose rates” “problematic” “disturbing trend”	Words of empathy and care <i>Examples:</i> “concerning overdose rates” “this trend is worrisome, and we are taking steps to improve upon prevention efforts to address the issue”

## Preventable deaths of suicide and substance use

The United States has seen a rise in deaths from opioids, alcohol, and suicide. The phrases “Deaths of Despair,” “Diseases of Despair and Disconnection,” and other like phrases have been used in the past to describe the relationship between these three conditions. MDH conducted a qualitative research study and found that this phrasing does not resonate with communities. It adds barriers to connecting with them and can result in community members feeling hopeless.

Instead, MDH recommends using the phrase “preventable deaths of suicide and substance use,” or similar language emphasizing preventable deaths. Our hope is that by focusing on prevention, we can build a positive narrative and call to action for suicide and substance use prevention.

## Photos, graphics, and colors

Like the words we use, images and design choices can shape the narrative. 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 the *positive result* of overdose prevention efforts. Images of people enjoying life or getting help can remind audiences of what is trying to be achieved or where they can go.

**Avoid using images with:**

- Stock photos of injection drug use, i.e. needles, spoons, bag of powder
- Pills or pill bottles
- Images of people using drugs
- Images of isolation, stress, or depression
- Dark or threatening colors and branding

**Use images (be sure to check on licensing) with:**

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