

GambleAware

Language guidance

12 ways to reduce stigma when
discussing gambling harms
– a language guide

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What is stigma and why does language matter?

Stigma is a process that results in people being viewed as being of lesser worth than the rest of the population. For people who experience gambling harms, stigma can be a significant challenge. It's a barrier to self-identifying, a barrier to support seeking, and drives harm in itself.

The stigma around gambling harms is pervasive but can be reduced with respectful and non-judgemental language.

“You put up that wall between yourself and your family so they can't see that side of you. You are almost ashamed of what you are doing and you can't stop doing it.”

Personal testimony highlighting the impact of stigma.

What is this guide?

This guide aims to reduce stigma by giving examples of language to avoid when talking about gambling harms, and alternatives that help reduce stigma. It was produced after an analysis by Sign Salad (an independent award-winning cultural insight agency specialising in language analysis) and refined by GambleAware, a peer reviewer, and those with lived experience. This page includes some contextual information on the process whilst page two provides a summary of the semiotic findings.

This is not an exhaustive guide. Language constantly evolves, and this guide will be updated in line with findings from our stigma research programme and wider feedback.

For access to the longer executive summary or to provide any feedback, please contact us at research@gambleaware.org

Who is this guide for?

It is not our intention to criticise others for using stigmatising language, but we are keen to provide guidance for ourselves and others working in the sector (e.g., gambling companies, government, health bodies, researchers and support or education professionals) to help reduce the stigma around gambling harms. A companion guide for those working in the media has also been produced and can be found on our website.

It is important to note that this guide does not intend to change the language of those who have lived experience of gambling harms. Feedback from members of our lived experience council noted that individuals experiencing harm can find it useful to use such terms to describe themselves or self-identify as part of their recovery journey.

Key things to consider when discussing gambling harms

Ideas to use

- 1. Use 'person-first' language** that shows an individual is more than just someone experiencing problems with their gambling. Terms such as someone who: *is experiencing gambling harms, has problems with their gambling, has a gambling disorder or gambling addiction* help reassure those experiencing harm that they are not to blame, and are not defined by their gambling behaviours.
- 2. Encourage empathy**, by depicting those experiencing harm within the context of their careers, families or other positive contributions to society. This communicates that these are otherwise successful people who face challenges in a particular area and shows that anyone can experience harms from gambling.
- 3. Use a peer-to-peer and inclusive tone of voice** to build relatability, such as let's, or we're. Amplify the voice of the community with lived experience by using their own testimony, words and representatives.
- 4. Use a journey metaphor**, describing individuals as *on a new path, taking the next step, overcoming obstacles or experiencing ups and downs*, to communicate the potential for positive progress, while acknowledging challenges along the way.
- 5. Emphasise the underlying drivers**, contextual variables, policy and wider inequalities linked with gambling harms to position gambling harms as a public health issue and encourage shared responsibility in looking for solutions, rather than suggesting that those experiencing gambling harms are inherently prone to harm or need to overcome these alone.
- 6. Signpost where those experiencing harms can go to receive advice, tools and support.** This helps to increase awareness of support available and normalise support seeking, working to increase uptake of support. It avoids positioning support seeking as a sign of weakness or something to be ashamed about. The following text can be used:

Anyone concerned about their gambling, or that of a loved one, can find free and confidential support instantly by searching GambleAware or contacting **The National Gambling Helpline** on **0808 8020 133**.

Things to avoid

- 7. Avoid reductive language** that reduce someone's identity to their behaviour, labelling them as the problem and to blame. This is the opposite of 'person-first' language and includes negatively-framed labels such as *gambling addict* and *problem / disordered / pathological / compulsive gambler*.
- 8. Avoid pathologising** those experiencing gambling harms with language such as *sick, diseased, addictive personality* or *addict*. This can mark those experiencing harm as inherently abnormal and/or unhealthy, wrongly implying that it is a chronic, potentially incurable condition that defines who they are.
- 9. Avoid drawing causal links and generalising between those who gamble and other stigmatised behaviours or choices** (e.g., presuming someone with a drug dependency is the same as someone with a gambling disorder). Avoid references to a gambling *binge* or *lifestyle* which generalises and suggests indulgence.
- 10. Avoid attempting to negate a stigmatising frame**, e.g. saying that someone is *no longer a gambling addict* or *clean*. This doesn't work to reduce stigma, as the reference to *addict* or *dirty* still furthers stigma. Instead, use positive frames, stating that someone is *abstaining* or *in recovery* from gambling, or focus on positive aspects of their life beyond gambling harms.
- 11. Avoid paternalistic language**, such as rigid *rules* or *do's and don'ts* lists that can convey a strict, 'top-down' tone, framing those experiencing gambling harms as irresponsible children in need of stern guidance. References to *responsible* gambling can imply that someone experiencing harms is irresponsible; more useful terms include *lower risk* or *harm reduction strategies*. These show that factors beyond the individual's control can increase their risk of harm, but recognise that there are things they can do to reduce their risk.
- 12. Avoid disempowering language that implies weakness**, such as referring to those experiencing gambling harms as desperate. Metaphors linking recovery to combat, such as *addiction, battle, kick the habit, or beat your demons*, should be used with caution or avoided.