



Culturally Safe and Responsive Language: Why It Matters

Supporting Aboriginal Clients in Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Contexts

Why Language Matters

Aboriginal peoples are deeply relational—our connections to Country, Culture, community, family, and identity are central to who we are. Words are more than just communication; they are the foundation of relationships and enduring connection. In cross-cultural settings, language carries immense power.

Using culturally safe and respectful language affirms identity, dignity, and community connection. It supports healing and recovery, especially for Aboriginal clients navigating challenges related to alcohol and other drugs (AOD).

Purpose of This Guide

This guide is designed to support practitioners working with Aboriginal clients in AOD treatment settings. It offers principles for communicating in ways that are respectful, empowering, and culturally responsive.

In Aboriginal cultures, Songlines are sacred pathways that connect people to Country, Culture, and identity. Recovery can be understood as building a personal Songline—a journey of healing and reconnection.

Key Principles for Language Use

• Use Empowering Language

Choose words that offer hope, strength, and agency. Avoid language that labels, perpetuates stereotypes or stigmatises.

• Honour Individual Language Choices

Allow individuals to choose the terms that reflect their identity and where they are in their healing journey. These terms may shift over time, just as a river changes course. For example, someone may identify as an “addict” to hold themselves accountable, while another may prefer “person in recovery” to reflect hope and progress. What matters is that the language honours their truth—not yours.

Importantly, the term a person uses to describe themselves may differ from the term they wish others to use when referring to them. Language should be fluid, responsive, and reflective—like the flow of a river—guided by the person’s own sense of identity and healing.

• Respect the Recovery Journey

Use language that honours strength and healing, such as “in recovery” or “on a healing journey.” Where possible, involve Aboriginal Elders or cultural knowledge holders to support culturally grounded communication.

• Maintain Dignity

Avoid derogatory terms like “junkie.” Use respectful alternatives such as “person who uses drugs” or “individual with alcohol dependence.” However, always respect the individual’s right to self-identify using terms that resonate with their experience. Language should never be prescribed or imposed.

• Avoid Casual or Dismissive Language

Be mindful of tone and phrasing. Recovery is a serious, personal, and often sacred journey.

• Encourage Positive Conversations

Practice active listening, empathy, and cultural awareness. Focus on strengths and resilience. Your words can foster connection, trust, and healing.

Final Thoughts

Aboriginal clients may be navigating complex challenges stemming from intergenerational trauma, disconnection from Culture, racism, and social exclusion. Language that is judgmental or stigmatising can deepen harm.

Using culturally safe and respectful language helps build trust, supports recovery, and affirms identity. It is a vital part of providing effective, compassionate, and culturally responsive care.

HOW THE LANGUAGE MATTERS GUIDE UPHOLDS THE ADARRN MODEL OF CARE PRINCIPLES

1. Centering Culture and Identity

The ADARRN Model of Care places culture and identity at the heart of healing, recognising that each Aboriginal residential rehabilitation service brings its own strengths, protocols, and cultural practices. The Language Matters guide reinforces this by advocating for language that affirms Aboriginal identity, dignity, and connection to Country, Culture, and community—core elements of the AMoC.

2. Flexibility and Individualisation

ADARRN's model is not a rigid blueprint; it's a flexible framework that empowers services to respond to local contexts and individual needs. The Language Matters guide mirrors this by encouraging practitioners to honour individual language choices, acknowledging that terms like “addict” or “person in recovery” may shift over time and differ between self-identification and preferred external reference. This fluidity reflects the AMoC's emphasis on person-centred planning and individualised care.

3. Holistic and Strength-Based Healing

The AMoC supports a wide range of healing modalities grounded in cultural integrity and holistic care. The Language Matters guide complements this by promoting empowering, strength-based language that supports healing journeys, avoids stigma, and fosters trust—essential for holistic recovery.

4. Community and Cultural Governance

ADARRN champions Aboriginal-led service delivery, cultural governance, and the embedding of community voices in care. The Language Matters guide supports this by recommending the involvement of Aboriginal Elders and cultural knowledge holders in communication, reinforcing the importance of culturally grounded dialogue and decision-making.

5. Trauma-Informed and Compassionate Practice

Both The Language Matters guide and the AMoC recognise the impact of intergenerational trauma, racism, and social exclusion. By advocating for language that is non-judgmental, respectful, and compassionate, the Language Matters guide directly supports the AMoC's goal of creating safe, healing environments for Aboriginal clients.

In Summary

The Language Matters guide is a practical extension of the ADARRN Model of Care. It translates the model's principles into everyday communication strategies that uphold cultural safety, respect, and healing. By embedding these language practices into AOD settings, practitioners can more effectively support Aboriginal clients in ways that are aligned with the values and vision of ADARRN.