Why Language Matters: 
Facing HIV Stigma in Our Own Words

Last updated: August 1, 2019

Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org

#thewellproject
Have you ever heard a person living with HIV describe themselves as “I am HIV”?

Do the words “infection” or “infected” feel negative to you?

Are you offended when you are referred to by your health condition first, instead of as a person first?

The words people use to talk about HIV affect the way people living with HIV feel about themselves. These words also have an impact on how others perceive people living with HIV.
Why Language Matters

- Helps shape understanding of the world we live in
- Is the foundation of our stories
- Describes who we are, how we connect with others, with ourselves

Words can inspire, **empower**, bring us hope ...

They can also bully, scare, destroy our sense of self

www.thewellproject.org
Why Language Matters

- Women may experience multiple forms of oppression, discrimination
- Based on gender, race, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, or other factors
- Often reinforced through language
  - An aggressive, powerful woman may be called “bitch”
  - A man with same qualities considered “ambitious,” viewed with respect
- Adding an HIV diagnosis can magnify this oppression experience
  - Affects self-worth, confidence, self-identity
Why Language Matters

• Language that reinforces stigma and discrimination, repeated over years, affects health and well-being of women living with HIV (WLHIV)
  – Stigma and stress have negative effect on women’s quality of life
  – Can affect her family, children, job, pregnancies
  – Stress of stigma can affect immune system

• HIV-related stigma affects prevention, deters people from being tested for HIV, makes disclosure harder
Why Language Matters

• Consequences of HIV-related stigma (from 2005 study) include:
  – Loss of income
  – Loss of hope
  – Increased feelings of worthlessness
  – Increased internalized stigma
  – Poor care in healthcare system, especially from non-HIV professionals
  – Loss of reputation in family and community

• Rare to find a woman living with HIV who has not felt stigmatized in some way
What Is HIV Stigma Communication?

- The **narrative** (public story of connected events) about HIV includes myths and false stereotypes that
  - Stigmatize HIV
  - Isolate people living with HIV
- Stigmatizing stereotypes make for good rumors, gossip
  - News media often uses them to get attention for stories
- Emotions most often shared in rumors are fear, anger, or disgust, research shows
- Rumors then become part of our social environment, regardless of whether they are true
What Is HIV Stigma Communication?

• **Stigma communication** can exist in language, labels, messages used to educate or talk about a health condition or group of people.

• Certain medical conditions stigmatized more often than others; seen as moral issues, character flaws, instead of biological diseases.
  – Leprosy ("lepers"), mental health ("the mentally ill"), substance use ("addicts"; "junkies"), HIV ("infected")

• Reducing people to a label dismisses their humanity, sets them apart from others.
HIV stigma communication is found in:

• History of the HIV epidemic
• Media
• Social marketing prevention campaigns
• Policies
• Research literature
• Movies
• Our own heads

Language we hear (from family or friends, news headlines, research articles, and more) becomes language we use to describe ourselves and others.

www.thewellproject.org
What Is People-First Language?

• Puts person before illness or label
• Describes and respects who they are, not what they happen to have been diagnosed with
• Helps eliminate prejudice; removes value judgments
• Describing people by labels or medical diagnoses devalues and disrespects them as individuals
  – Never hear “cancerous people” or “I am cancer positive”
  – Often hear “HIV-infected woman”
  – Preferred phrase is “woman living with HIV”; refers to person first, before mentioning their health condition

www.thewellproject.org
The Denver Principles

- Document written by HIV advocates in 1983
- In opening words, Denver Principles called for use of person-first language:
  
  "We condemn attempts to label us as 'victims,' a term which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally 'patients,' a term which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are 'People With AIDS.'"

- This narrative describes people living with HIV as human, valuable; shows respect, compassion
## Preferred Language About HIV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stigmatizing Language (“Try not to use”)</th>
<th>Preferred Language (“Use this instead”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIV-infected person</td>
<td>Person living with HIV; PLHIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV or AIDS patient, AIDS or HIV carrier</td>
<td>Never use “infected” when referring to a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positives or HIVers</td>
<td>Died of AIDS-related illness, AIDS-related complications, end-stage HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Died of AIDS, to die of AIDS</td>
<td>Died of AIDS-related illness, AIDS-related complications, end-stage HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS virus</td>
<td>HIV (AIDS is a diagnosis, not a virus; it cannot be transmitted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-blown AIDS</td>
<td>There is no medical definition for this phrase; simply use the term AIDS, or Stage 3 HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV virus</td>
<td>This is redundant; simply use the term HIV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero new infections</td>
<td>Zero new HIV transmissions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Language About HIV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stigmatizing Language (&quot;Try not to use&quot;)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV infections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV infected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became infected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serodiscordant couple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother-to-child transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim, innocent victim, sufferer, contaminated, infected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Preferred Language About HIV

### Stigmatizing Language ("Try not to use")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stigmatizing Language</th>
<th>Preferred Language (&quot;Use this instead&quot;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To catch AIDS, to contract AIDS, transmit AIDS, to catch HIV</td>
<td>An AIDS diagnosis; developed AIDS; to contract HIV (AIDS is a diagnosis; cannot be passed from one person to the next)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliant</td>
<td>Adherent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitute or prostitution</td>
<td>Sex worker; sale of sexual services; transactional sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promiscuous</td>
<td>This is a value judgment and should be avoided. Use &quot;multiple partners&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprotected sex</td>
<td>Sex without barriers or treatment-as-prevention methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Condomless sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Condomless sex with (or without) PrEP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)
### Preferred Language About HIV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stigmatizing Language (&quot;Try not to use&quot;)</th>
<th>Preferred Language (&quot;Use this instead&quot;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death sentence, fatal condition, or life-threatening condition</td>
<td>HIV is a chronic and manageable health condition as long as people are in care and treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tainted” blood; “dirty” needles</td>
<td>Blood containing HIV; shared needles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean, as in “I am clean, are you”</td>
<td>Referring to yourself or others as being “clean” suggests that those living with HIV are dirty. Avoid this term.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| End HIV, End AIDS | End HIV transmission, end HIV-related deaths  
Be specific: are we ending AIDS diagnoses or are we ending the transmission of HIV? |
Important to note:

• Terms and phrases like "living with AIDS" and “I am HIV-positive” have been empowering to many people living with HIV

• For others, these terms may not describe their experience; may feel stigmatizing

• Words and language mean different things to different people, at different times in their lives

Allow others to define themselves as they wish; always start from a place of respect

www.thewellproject.org
Two Kinds of Stigma

**External stigma** comes from:
- What we hear from our family, friends, healthcare providers, others
- What we read or hear in media

**Internal stigma** comes from:
- Self-judgment and negative self-talk we hear in our heads
- Developed by our life experiences -- with stigma, discrimination, shame, guilt

www.thewellproject.org
Negative Self-Talk

• Things we tell ourselves daily; define who we are inside

• Sometimes, a story we tell ourselves:
  – We are not good enough, strong enough, smart enough, or beautiful enough
  – We deserve everything challenging that has happened to us
  – We are damaged goods

• One of the first places to start to make change is in the language we hear in our own heads

www.thewellproject.org
Empowering Women Through Language

• To address *internalized stigma*, we can change messages we say to ourselves
  – Helps to change self-image
  – We begin to treat ourselves with more compassion

• Things you can do to make these changes:
  – Mirror work and self-affirmations
  – Examining and changing our self-talk

www.thewellproject.org
Mirror Work and Positive Affirmations

- **Mirror work** involves looking in mirror, saying positive affirmations (messages we tell ourselves):
  - "Thank you! That's wonderful!" when something good happens in life
  - "This thing will pass, but I love you, and that is forever" when something bad happens
  - "Looking good!" as you look at your own lovely face

- Researchers have found that positive affirmations and mirror work has helped many women improve their self-image, confidence, outlook, health, well-being

www.thewellproject.org
Examining and Changing Our Self-Talk

- Write down thoughts, messages you tell yourself *(negative self-talk)*
- Review messages by yourself or with friends
- Examine specific language you choose to describe yourself and current situation; ask yourself:
  - Are these thoughts *true*?
  - Are these thoughts *helpful*?
  - Do they tear me down, or empower and *lift me up*?
- Try replacing old image with a new, more accurate image of yourself *(positive self-talk)*

www.thewellproject.org
Examining and Changing Our Self-Talk

**Examples of Negative Self-Talk**
- I am infected with a horrible disease; no one will love me
- I deserve HIV; it’s my fault
- I can’t do anything right; I am not good enough
- I am an HIV-infected mother, daughter, woman

**Examples of Positive Self-Talk**
- I am living with HIV and I am lovable
- I can follow my goals and dreams and live an amazing life
- I am a woman living with HIV and I can empower myself and others

www.thewellproject.org
Changing Language, Making Change

- For many WLHIV, thinking about and make changes to their HIV language has been empowering
- For some, has led to pointing out stigmatizing language used by others: family, friends, providers
- Others may begin reaching out to media when outlets use inappropriate language
- Some people join campaigns working on language issues
  - HIV advocates have won changes to stigmatizing language used by large institutions (e.g., U.S. CDC)

www.thewellproject.org
Changing Language, Making Change

• These are powerful ways to be an advocate; they don't all involve being a loud voice in a big crowd
  – Each time anyone questions (even to themselves) use of a phrase that fuels stigma and ignorance, they contribute to building hope
  – This is part of changing our culture from one that disrespects women living with HIV, to one that uses language to support power and dignity of all women

www.thewellproject.org
• To learn more about this topic, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet on this topic:
  – Why Language Matters: Facing HIV Stigma in Our Own Words

• For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
  – www.thewellproject.org
  – www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  – www.twitter.com/thewellproject