

# Glass Half Full: How Stigmatizing Starts with One Word

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**Essay Prompt:** The passage describes stigma as a major problem in the mental health field (1). Do you agree or disagree with the assertion that calling a person with alcohol use disorder a “alcoholic” is detrimental for their care and engagement with treatment systems? Please clearly state whether you agree or disagree and provide a justification for your answer. Please limit your response to the space provided below.

According to the Mayo Clinic (2), Framing bias is the tendency for people to react differently to the same information when it is presented or ‘framed’ with different contexts or connotations. A famous example of framing bias is the glass of water that is either half full or half empty depending on how the glass is framed. The language used in everyday life can color the way we view the world. The same can be said in the medical field. In the medical field, there is currently a stigma around substance use disorders like alcohol use disorder (AUD). The negatively framed language that is used has a great impact on this stigma and the patients with these disorders.

One definition for alcohol use disorder is repeated alcohol use with difficulty controlling alcohol

consumption and difficulty stopping alcohol use despite the problems it causes the user (2). Unfortunately, as it is complex, alcohol use disorder presents itself in each individual differently as a result of varying influences, and there are many different conceptualizations of this disorder. In our society, the public conceptualizes this disorder in an inherently negative way. Patients with alcohol use disorder are viewed through stereotypes depicting them as “dangerous,” “unpredictable,” and “blameworthy” (3). This contributes greatly to the stigma around the disorder and the discrimination that patients with AUD face. Because of the widespread nature of this stigma, many with AUD internalize these negative viewpoints which leads to feelings of “guilt, shame, decreased self-

esteem, lower self-efficacy, and poorer recovery outcomes" (3).

Interestingly, despite this strong stigma surrounding alcohol-related disorders, alcohol use, and subsequently alcohol use disorder, is common within the United States. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism stated that in the year 2022, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 80% of the population have consumed alcohol in their lives, many starting at twelve years of age (4). Since the popularity of alcohol in modern media in the United States has increased, individuals as young as 12 years old are being exposed to and influenced by alcohol ads or the subliminal messaging that using substances is "cool" (5). If young individuals develop a disorder due to this exposure, they are shamed from admitting their problem and seeking treatment.

The demoralizing language used to describe patients with AUD not only greatly contributes to the stigma around the disorder, but also negatively impacts the patient's treatment. To cope with the feelings of guilt and shame due to the stigma, which lowers the patient's self-efficacy and leads to poorer recovery, rather than seek treatment, many employ a strategy called label avoidance where they avoid the stigma and the shameful feelings that come with it by avoiding the label of someone with an AUD (3). According to Morris et al. (2023), the label 'alcoholic' had higher explicit and implicit stigma ratings amongst the public population (3). By labeling someone an 'alcoholic,' they are automatically framed as 'different' from a nonalcoholic or the general public population and, because of the stigma, 'bad.' Thus, to reject the harmful label of an 'alcoholic,' these people with alcohol use disorders also reject any treatment that they would otherwise receive. To properly reject this identity, some with less severe cases of AUD may choose to label others, whose cases are more severe, as the ones with a 'real' alcohol problem, whereas they may frame their drinking issues as 'normal.' This stigma would affect the level of effort the patients put into treatment and the

treatment the patients could receive. If the language used to describe them makes them feel as though the disorder is a major part of their life and identity, they may not be able to believe they could recover, leading to the poorer recovery outcomes that are seen.

It is not only the public and the individuals with AUD that are impacted by the language used. According to Volkow et al. (2021), professionals in the field would lean more towards punishing the patient rather than treating them when their disorder was worded in a more negatively connotative manner, such as if they were called an alcoholic rather than a person with a substance use disorder (2). Furthermore, these poor recovery outcomes apply to those who seek treatment. Many do not. According to Morris et al. 2023, only one in six individuals with an alcohol use disorder seeks help—largely due to the stigma associated with the condition (3). The gap in the treatment provided to those with substance use disorders is much wider than for other psychiatric disorders (2). This is supported by how of the 29.5 million people aged twelve and older with AUD in the year 2022, only 2.2 million people (about 7%) received treatment for their alcohol use in that year, and about 634 thousand people (roughly 2%) received medical-assisted treatment that year (4).

With so few patients seeking and receiving treatment for AUD compared to the many who are afflicted, it is clear that this is a widespread issue within the United States. It is necessary to address the stigma surrounding the disorder to help the patients receive help and that begins with our language. The term 'alcoholic' attaches the disorder to the patient's identity, shaping the way they are viewed by those around them, by professionals, and by themselves. The phrase 'substance use disorder,' on the other hand, separates the disorder from the patient's identity and allows them to be seen as whole, multifaceted individuals instead of being defined by one stigmatized trait. They can be framed the half-empty way as people with 'bad character,' or

they can be framed the half-full way as people with a disorder that needs to be treated.

## References

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