SBIRT IN PRIMARY CARE

Effective Communication Guidelines for Primary Care Staff

mosaic GROUP

As a primary care provider, you play a pivotal role in supporting and motivating individuals on their journey toward change. Effective communication is key. How you speak can shape how people feel—about themselves, the care they receive, and their ability to make a change—and can directly impact the outcomes they achieve.

This guide offers practical examples of what to say (and what to avoid) when discussing alcohol or substance use. It supports stigma-free communication not only with patients, but across the care team. By modeling respectful, supportive language, you help create a culture of compassionate, effective care.

TIP 1

Use respectful language.

Words matter. They can either reinforce stigma or help reduce it. Choosing respectful, nonjudgmental language—even outside of the patient's earshot—creates a more supportive and welcoming environment for care.

Say This	Not That
"How is your recovery going?"	"How long have you been clean?"
"Patient is using non-prescribed pain medication daily."	"Patient is an addict."

TIP 2

Use person-first language.

Refer to the patient as a person, not by their condition. This helps reduce stigma; demonstrates respect; and fosters a safe, inclusive environment for care and conversation.

Say This	Not That
"Mr. Smith is in Room 4. He shared that he is drinking alcohol daily."	"The guy in Room 4 is an alcoholic."
"Ms. Jones stated she is experiencing pain despite taking 10 mg of oxycontin daily."	"She's an addict and probably just drug-seeking."

		Say This	Not That
TIP 3	**Avoid leading questions.** Stick to what the patient tells you and what you observe. Let them tell their own story. Avoid inserting your opinions or making assumptions.	"How often do you drink alcohol?"	"You're not drinking every day, are you?"
		"Sometimes people find it hard to cut back on drinking, or they notice it starting to affect their work, relationships, or daily life. Have you noticed anything like that for yourself?"	"You don't think you have a problem with alcohol though, right?"
TIP 4	**Be the patient's cheerleader.** Encourage patients to think about both the pros and cons of change. Give them agency—remind them they know themselves best and can decide what they want to do and how to get there. Invite collaboration to help them believe they can succeed.	"What support do you need to help you change your alcohol or substance use?"	"It sounds like you need to go to treatment."
		"It sounds like you've had some tough experiences with change before. Let's talk about what worked and what didn't. Your past efforts can help guide the plan we build together. You're not alone in this."	"You've tried before and failed. Maybe this time will be different if you just give it your all."
TIP 5	**Encourage teamwork.** Work with the patient and care team to support meaningful change. Always make sure the patient agrees to a referral before moving forward—collaboration builds trust and improves outcomes.	"It sounds like you're facing some challenges. How are you managing?"	"You told me you would stop drinking—why haven't you been following the plan?"
		"How do you feel about me putting in a referral to a care manager to explore some options and resources that may be helpful?"	"You have to talk to a counselor about that."

Be the Change

Change starts with you. When you lead by example, others are likely to follow. Here are a few ways you can help lead change in your practice:

- **Listen without judgment.** Give patients space to share their experience.
- **Stay informed.** Learn about substance use and share evidence-based knowledge with your team.
- **Speak up.** Address stigmatizing language or mistreatment when you hear it.
- **Promote facts over fear.** Replace negative assumptions with compassion and credible information.