

IMAGES MATTER:

A Guide to Reducing Stigma in Visual Media

Images, like words, play a powerful role in shaping how the public understands substance use and people with substance use disorders (SUD). Visuals convey subtle yet impactful messages that can either reinforce stigma or promote empathy, dignity, and understanding. This Images Matter guide was created as a companion to our Words Matter campaign to support more accurate, humanizing visual storytelling.

WHY IT MATTERS

1. Reducing Stigma Improves Outcomes

Using images that highlight **recovery, dignity, and resilience** helps shift public attitudes and policies toward more supportive solutions. By focusing on people's potential rather than their circumstances, we reduce the stigma surrounding SUD. Inclusive, everyday images further challenge stereotypes and promote fair, accurate representation.

2. Representation Shapes Public Perception

The media plays a critical role in how people understand addiction and recovery.

- **70% of adults with an SUD are employed**, yet media portrayals often only show extreme cases of unemployment or homelessness (Frone et al., 2022).
- Recovery is possible—millions of people are in recovery, but their stories are underrepresented in mainstream media.

3. Ethical Storytelling Inspires Change

Journalists, content creators, and organizations can foster more accurate and ethical storytelling **by choosing images that show people in their full humanity**, not just at their lowest moments.

This guide serves as a starting point for thoughtful representation, encouraging users to choose visuals that promote dignity, inclusion, and recovery.

Use this...	Instead of this...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced “before-and-after” images that emphasize progress, resilience, and hope rather than deterioration. • Images of people receiving support (e.g., counseling sessions, meetings with healthcare providers, group meetings, or positive social interactions). • People-centered images focused on recovery (e.g., people in supportive environments or engaging in everyday life). • Photos showing people as active participants in their lives (e.g., going to work, spending time with family, speaking at events). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images of isolated people in dark, desolate settings. • Images of people “nodding off” on sidewalks or in unsafe conditions. • Images of drug paraphernalia (e.g., needles, pipes, pills, or drug bags) without context. • Depictions of people experiencing homelessness or unemployment without also showing community support or solutions. • Overly dramatized “rock bottom” photos that suggest hopelessness or failure.

CONTINUES ON THE NEXT PAGE



Use this...	Instead of this...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photos that convey hope and progress (e.g., nature scenes, hands being held, or people in empowering poses). • Inclusive, everyday settings (e.g., home, workplace, or public spaces). • Diverse groups and people of all ages in supportive environments. • Images of wellness and healthy routines (e.g., exercise, breathing, meditation, or healthy meals). • Public figures and celebrities in recovery who have openly shared their journey, helping to normalize treatment and success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime or emergency scenes that only focus on law enforcement responses rather than treatment access. • Reinforcing stereotypes about specific demographics (e.g., tents, young people in hoodies, people experiencing homelessness). • Images of people visibly struggling (e.g., looking tired, malnourished, or disheveled).

ACTION STEPS FOR MEDIA, ORGANIZATIONS & ADVOCATES

- ✓ Choose people-first images that emphasize recovery, wellness, and real-life moments.
- ✓ Seek diverse and representative visuals that avoid racial, gender, or economic biases.
- ✓ Offer context when using difficult images, ensuring they don't reinforce stereotypes or hopelessness.
- ✓ Pair images with accurate, person-first language (refer to our [Words Matter Language Guide](#) for guidance).
- ✓ Use available resources like our **CAM Academy Images Matter Library** with approved, non-stigmatizing images or collaborate with people with lived experience to guide ethical media choices.

NEED SUPPORT?

- For access to our **CAM Academy Images Matter Library**, contact us at CAMAcademy@dhha.org
- To learn more about our campaign or to schedule a presentation on responsible media communication practices, please contact CAMAcademy@dhha.org.

Let's work together to change the narrative—because the words and images we use matter.

REFERENCES:

Frone, M.R., Chosewood, L.C., Osborne, J.C. et al. Workplace Supported Recovery from Substance Use Disorders: Defining the Construct, Developing a Model, and Proposing an Agenda for Future Research. *Occup Health Sci* 6, 475–511 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41542-022-00123-x>