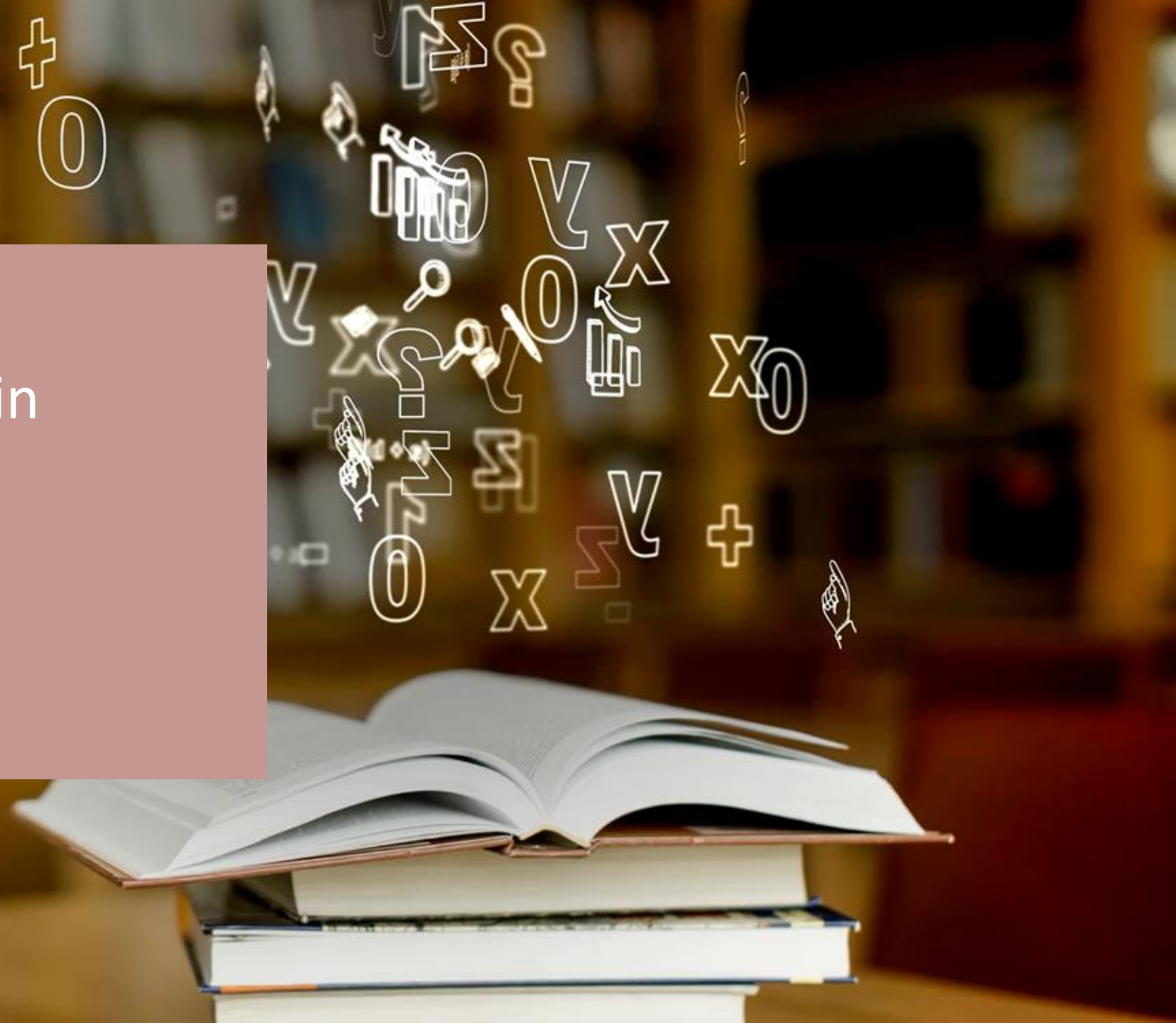


The Power of Words: Navigating Language in Mental Health and Addiction

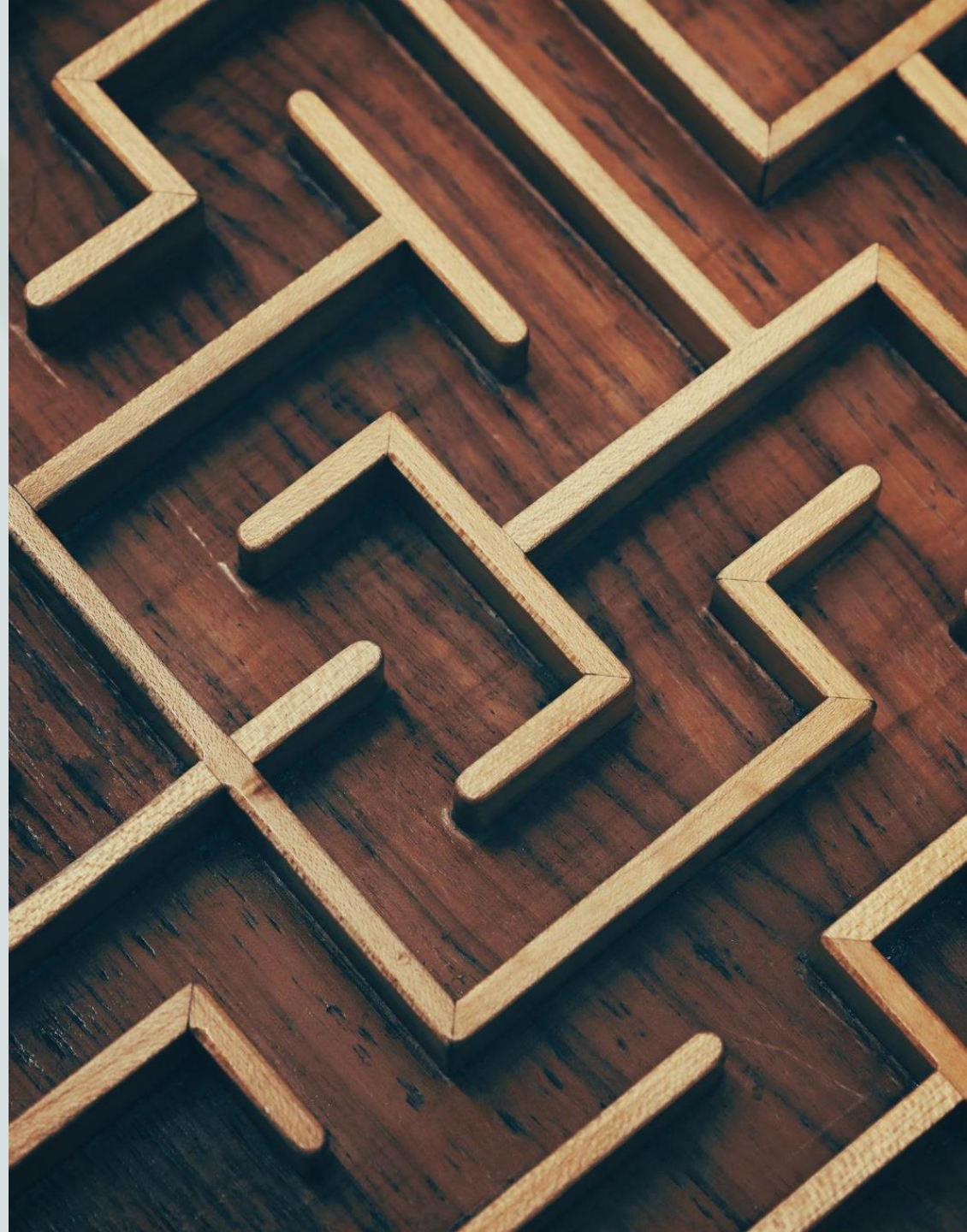
Simon Bratt

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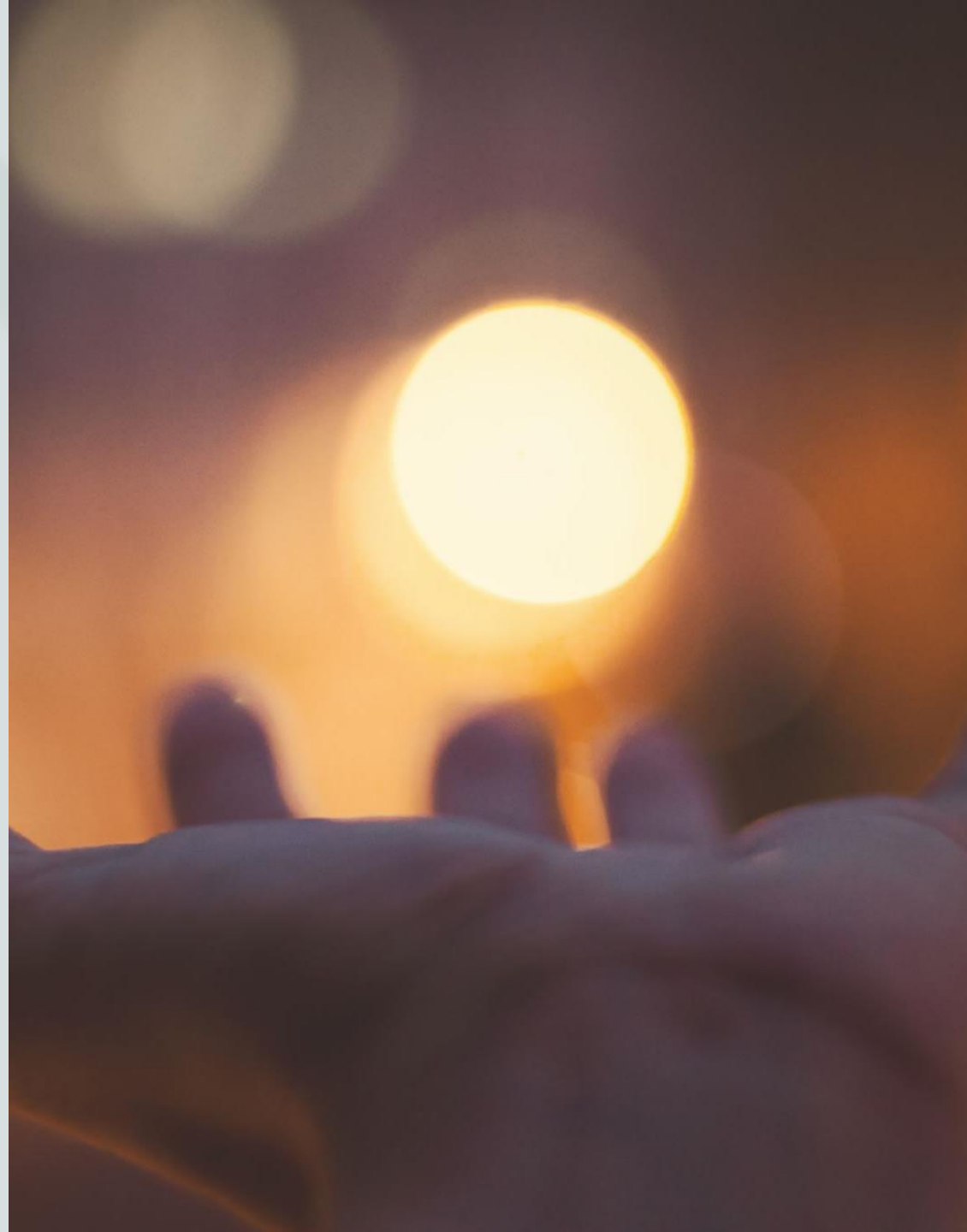
Today's Journey

- We embark on a thought-provoking journey through the labyrinth of language, understanding its power in shaping perceptions, policies, and lives.
- Our exploration will delve into the historical roots of stigmatized labels, the transformative potential of empathetic language, and the pivotal role of personal and societal language choices in mental health and addiction.



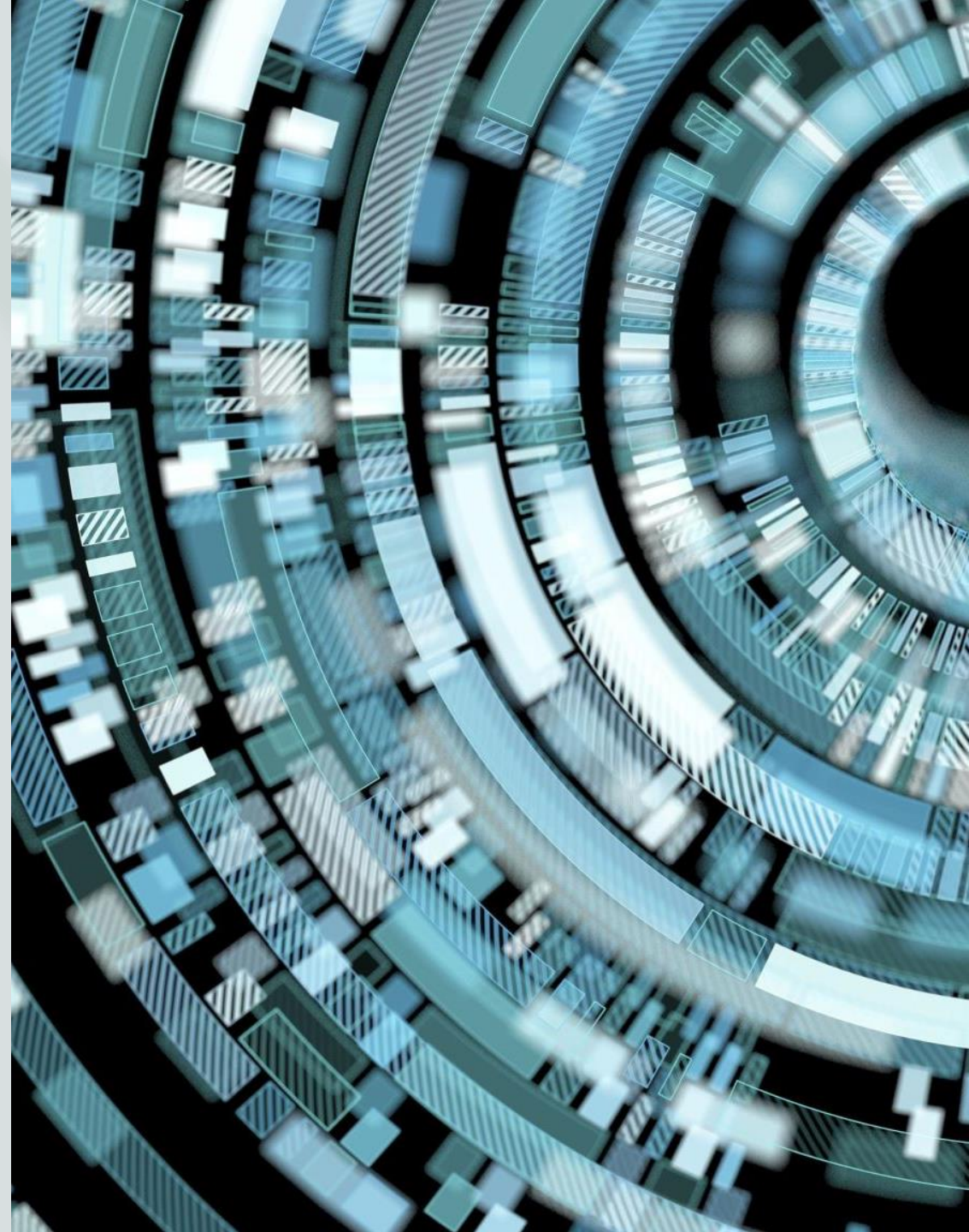
Language: A Dual-Edged Sword

- Language serves as both a window into our deepest beliefs and a barrier that can distort or obscure reality.
- Through words, we express our cultural, historical, and personal identities, yet these same words can also shape and limit our understanding.
- Every word carries with it the power to influence thoughts, emotions, and actions.
- In the realm of addiction, the stakes are significantly heightened.



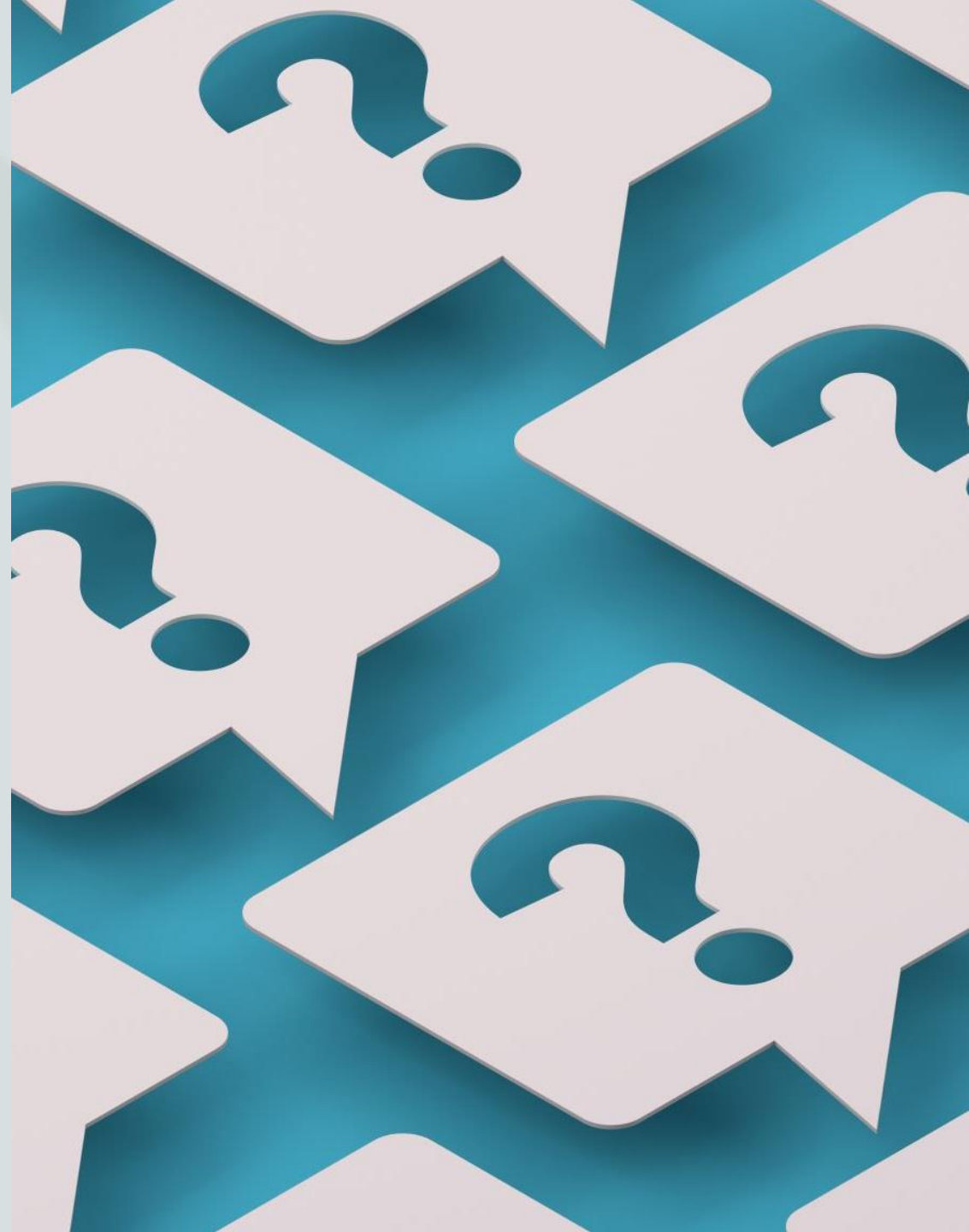
Addiction language through lens of the Sapir –Whorf Hypothesis

- Strong Version (Linguistic Determinism): This version argues that language determines thought and that linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories. According to this view, speakers of different languages would perceive and interpret the world differently because their languages dictate different structures of understanding.
- Weak Version (Linguistic Relativity): The more accepted version suggests that language influences thought and decision-making processes. It means that while speakers of different languages may perceive the world in various ways, these differences are not insurmountable barriers to communication or understanding. Language is seen as influencing thought rather than outright determining it



The Power of Language in Shaping Perceptions

- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, particularly its linguistic relativity aspect, suggests that the language we use to discuss addiction can significantly influence public perception and the stigmatisation of those experiencing it.





Understanding the Language of Addiction

An article by Rosenthal and Faris

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/16066359.2018.1543412?needAccess=true>

Controversy of the term 'Addiction'

- Considered a layman's term (Rosenthal and Faris, 2020)
- Too many meaning of addiction (Alexander and Schweighofer, 1998)
- Lacked any 'universally agreed upon definition' (Buchman et al. 2011)
- using it was 'conceptual chaos' (Shaffer 1986, 1997).



The Evolution of Language in Addiction



- Abuse
- Misuse
- Addict

Misuse



Date back to the 14th century derived from the combination of 'mis' (meaning badly, wrongly) and 'use' (verb) signifying 'use or treat improperly'.



By the 1530s, the meaning expanded to 'abuse, treat badly, subject to ill-treatment'.



The term encompasses both the action of using something in a way that it was not intended for, as well as the broader implications of causing harm or damage through such improper use.



Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

A photograph of a red pawn and a group of yellow pawns on a wooden surface. The red pawn is on the left, and the yellow pawns are on the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Abuse

Shapes our perceptions and attitudes towards people experiencing substance-related difficulties.

Drug abuse is a social evil and one of the major problems of the modern world (World Drug Report, 2014).



Addict

Again, originates from the 1530s, used in the sense of 'to devote or give up (oneself) to a habit or occupation.

It comes from the Latin "addictus," the past participle of "addicere," which means "to deliver, award, yield; make over, sell," and can be figuratively understood as "to devote, consecrate; sacrifice, sell out, betray, abandon."

The societal Implications of Terminology

- Words, in their essence, are vessels of meaning.



Case Study: The Intersection of Substance Use and Life Experiences

Mr A is a 45-year-old male who presented for an assessment of his mental health.

Mr A had used substance (Heroin and alcohol) for over 10 years.

Mr. A wanted to stop using substance but, was fearful because his substance use was a means to escape the realities of his past and present experiences of abuse.

He articulated that he pick the above substance as they provided the most immediate relief from his psychological distress.

Describing his substance use as strategic rather than compulsive, aimed at mitigating the impact of traumatic memories and current stressors.

The Impact

- The use of terms such as "abuse," "misuse," and "addict" significantly impacts stigma and discrimination against individuals experiencing substance use challenges

Abuse (Impact)

- Abuse: The term "abuse" implies a moral failing or deliberate wrongdoing by the individual. It suggests a lack of control or choice in their actions, framing substance use as a purely voluntary act of self-harm or harm towards others. This can lead to stigmatization, where individuals are viewed as morally weak or flawed, and discrimination, where they may be denied opportunities or support due to these negative perceptions.



Misuse (Impact)

- While slightly less pejorative than "abuse," "misuse" still implies incorrect or inappropriate use of substances without necessarily considering the complex factors that lead to substance use. It can still contribute to stigma by suggesting that individuals are using substances in a way that is not socially or medically approved, leading to judgments about their behaviour that may overlook underlying issues such as trauma, mental health conditions, or socio-economic factors





Addict

Perhaps the most stigmatizing of the three, the label "addict" reduces an individual's identity to their substance use, overshadowing all other aspects of their personhood. It can lead to significant discrimination, as individuals labelled as addicts may face barriers in employment, housing, social relationships, and accessing treatment services. The term reinforces stereotypes and prejudices, making it more difficult for individuals to seek help and recover due to fear of judgment and ostracisation

Towards a More Empathic Language

- The impact of these terms on stigma and discrimination underscores the need for a shift towards more empathetic and person-first language in discussions around substance use.



Revisiting the Self-Medication Hypothesis

- Viewing substance use through the lens of the self-medication hypothesis offers several benefits, both in terms of understanding the underlying reasons for substance use and in shifting the language we use to talk about it.



Increased Empathy and Understanding:

- Understanding that substance use can be a form of self-medication for underlying issues fosters empathy and compassion. It encourages a more nuanced conversation about addiction, focusing on the root causes rather than just the symptoms.

Shift in Language

- Adopting the self-medication hypothesis prompts a shift towards more compassionate language. Instead of terms like "addict" or "abuser," which carry stigma, we can use phrases like "person using substances to cope with trauma" or "individual seeking relief from mental health challenges." This change in language reduces stigma and reflects a deeper understanding of the complexities involved.

Holistic Treatment Approaches

- This perspective supports the development and implementation of holistic treatment programs that address both the substance use and the underlying emotional, psychological or societal issues. It advocates for integrated treatment plans that include mental health care, trauma-informed care, and substance use treatment.



Promotion of Mental Health Services:

- Recognising substance use as a coping mechanism for mental health issues can lead to greater emphasis on improving access to mental health services. It highlights the need for comprehensive mental health care as a critical component of substance use treatment.



Policy and Funding Shifts:

- Viewing substance use through the self-medication lens can influence policy and funding decisions, prioritizing approaches that address the root causes of substance use, including expanded mental health services, social support systems, and harm reduction strategies.





Shaping a New Narrative

A high-angle, close-up photograph of a wooden table in a workspace. The table is cluttered with various items: several sheets of paper, some featuring diagrams and text; numerous colorful sticky notes (pink, yellow, green) scattered across the papers; a color calibration chart; a white mug; a desk lamp; and other office supplies. A person's hand, wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt, is visible in the center, pointing towards a specific area on one of the papers. Another person's hand is visible on the left side of the frame, resting on the table. The overall scene suggests a collaborative design or brainstorming session.

Practical Applications

Empathetic Communication Training

- Actionable Strategy: Implement training programs for healthcare providers and social workers focusing on empathetic communication and person-first language.
- Example: Workshops that use role-playing scenarios to practice responding to patients' experiences with substance use, emphasising understanding and support rather than judgment.





Policy Advocacy for Language Reform

Actionable Strategy: Advocate for policy changes at institutional and governmental levels to reflect the self-medication hypothesis and person-first language in official documents and guidelines.

Example: Campaigns aimed at revising healthcare policies to replace terms like "substance abuse" with "substance use disorder" to encourage a more compassionate approach.



Public Awareness Campaigns

- Actionable Strategy: Launch public awareness campaigns that educate the community about the complexities of substance use, the self-medication hypothesis, and the importance of empathetic language.
- Example: Social media campaigns featuring stories of individuals' journeys with substance use, highlighting the reasons behind their use and the impact of supportive language on their recovery.

Integrated Treatment Programs:



Actionable Strategy: Develop and promote integrated treatment programs that address both the psychological pain or trauma and the substance use, based on the self-medication hypothesis.



Example: Treatment centres offering combined therapy sessions, including trauma-informed care, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), and substance use counselling, to treat the whole person rather than just the symptoms of substance use.



Research and Evaluation

Actionable Strategy: Conduct and support research to further explore the benefits of viewing substance use through the self-medication lens and the impact of empathetic language on treatment outcomes.

Example: Longitudinal studies assessing the effectiveness of person-first language training among healthcare providers on patient engagement and recovery rates.



Educational Materials and Resources:

Actionable Strategy: Develop and distribute educational materials that highlight the self-medication hypothesis and the importance of empathetic language in understanding substance use.

Example: Brochures, websites, and video content that provide information on the roots of substance use, challenging common stereotypes, and offering guidance on supportive language.

What to Use and What Not to Use!

Instead of...	Use...	Because...
Addict	Person with substance use difficulty/need	Emphasizes that the issue is something a person "has," not something they "are," avoiding negative connotations.
User	Person with OUD (Opioid Use Difficulty/Need)	Identifies the specific substance issue without stigmatizing the individual.
Substance or drug abuser	Person	"Person" focuses on the individual's humanity, not their substance use.
Junkie	Person in active use; use the person's name	Humanizes by using the individual's name and describing their status without judgment.
Alcoholic	Person with alcohol use difficulty/need	Specifies the issue without labelling the person, fostering a more understanding approach.
Drunk	Person who engages in unhealthy/hazardous alcohol use	Describes behaviour without stigmatizing, recognizing the potential for change.
Former addict	Person in recovery or long-term recovery	Highlights the ongoing journey of recovery, encouraging a positive outlook.
Habit	Substance use difficulty/need	Recognizes the complexity of substance use issues beyond a simple "choice" or "habit."
Abuse	Use	Neutral description of behaviour, avoiding moral judgment or implications of wrongdoing.
Opioid substitution replacement therapy	Medication for Opioid Use Difficulty/Need (MODN)	Avoids suggesting medication is a mere substitute, emphasizing its critical role in treatment.
Clean	Testing negative; In recovery	Clinically accurate, non-stigmatizing terms respect the individual's condition and progress.
Dirty	Testing positive; Person who uses drugs	Clinically accurate, non-stigmatizing terms, avoiding moral judgment.
Addicted baby	New-born with neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome	Clarifies new-borns show withdrawal symptoms, not addiction, using medically accurate terminology.
Smack Head	Person with heroin use difficulty/need	Avoids derogatory slang, opting for neutral, understanding language.
Pot Head	Person who uses cannabis	Describes behaviour without negative judgment, focusing on the individual.
Crackhead	Person with crack cocaine use difficulty/need	Avoids derogatory terms for a neutral, empathetic description of the individual's situation.
Meth Head	Person with methamphetamine use difficulty/need	Focuses on the difficulty rather than the substance, encouraging a supportive perspective.
Druggie	Person using substances	Neutral term that identifies behaviour without contributing to stigma.
Alky	Person with alcohol use difficulty/need	Uses non-stigmatizing language to describe someone dealing with alcohol-related difficulties.



Questions/Thoughts