PHN-PREP
Public Health Nursing Practice, Research & Education Program

Professional Resource

Assessing Substance Use Health

This resource offers practice guidance to support public health nurses in assessing substance use health during home visits with pregnant individuals and caregivers of infants and young children. The purpose is to describe the continuum of substance use health, provide strategies to initiate non-judgmental and relational conversations with clients about their substance use, and provide guidance for applying trauma- and violence-informed principles to shift from screening to an assessment-focused approach to learning about substance use.

The Continuum of Substance Use Health

Describing substance use health as a continuum allows for the recognition that:

- Substance use health exists on a spectrum ranging from no use to use that harms health.[1,2,4]
- Many adults use substances in everyday life. Substances may be used for social, recreational, cultural or treatment purposes.
- The use of substances impacts health outcomes.[1,2,3,4]
- There are both benefits and risks to the use of substances. Health promotion can occur at any time or place along the continuum.
- Substance use may flux and change with time and circumstance, dependent upon individual conditions, overall health status and well-being.[1,5]
- Stigma may be experienced by people at any place on the spectrum; regardless of their level and type of substances used.[4]

DEFINITIONS

Substance: Any psychoactive compound with the potential to cause health effects. Examples include caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, cannabis, opioids, or other prescription and non-prescription drugs.[1,2,3]

Substance Use: Refers to the use of any substance for recreational, medical, ceremonial / religious, or coping purposes, or pain management. Substance use is described as a non-linear continuum; from non-use through to substance use disorder and the associated health effects.[1,2,3]

Substance use is common. The Substance Use Health Spectrum™, developed by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CAPSA), is a model that helps normalize conversations about substance use health and supports understanding without judgment in a non-stigmatizing way.[2,4,5,6] The spectrum model is a visual representation of substance use health as a set of concentric layers that describe the types of substance use health along with the related health effects. The **outer layer** serves as a reminder that people can experience stigma anywhere along the spectrum. The **middle layer** lists substance use stages, ranging from “no use” to “substance use disorder”. The **inner layer** describes a person's related health effects at each stage, ranging from no longer or not using substances to no longer being able to maintain health goals.

The Substance Use Health Spectrum™ can be accessed at: https://capsa.ca/substance-use-health/

Starting the Conversation about Substance Use Health: A Relational Approach to Nursing Practice

Language matters, and how public health nurses introduce the topic of substance use is important. Sharing a brief rationale about why you are asking, and what will be done with the information gathered by the assessment, will potentially help to reduce the client's apprehension and fear of stigma or being met with judgment.[1] It is important to recognize that many clients will anticipate being treated with stigma regarding substance use health, particularly those who have lived experience with substance use, identify as Indigenous, or experience inequity and socioeconomic barriers.[5]

Any substance use health conversation should be relational, trauma- and violence-informed, nonjudgmental, and responsive to the client's readiness and context.[2,4,5,7]

DEFINITIONS

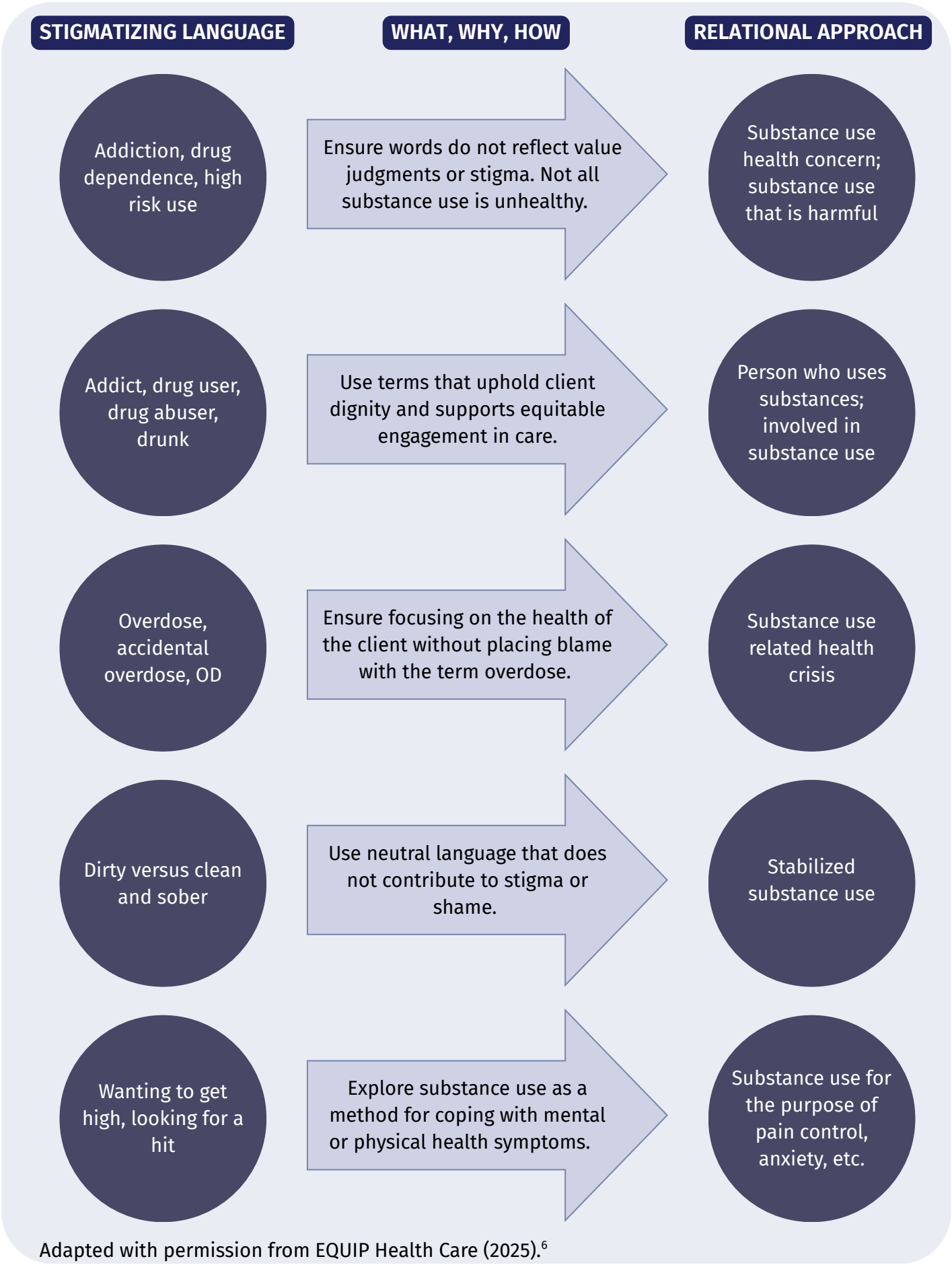
Relational Approach: A method of nursing practice and understanding that focuses on relationships within and among people and their environments. It is being aware of the social and historical contexts, power dynamics, and identities of all persons involved in the relationship. It allows for genuine curiosity and engagement when understanding and knowledge are created and uncertainty is embraced.[7]

Introduction scripts can be used to begin conversation:

"Part of understanding your overall health and wellbeing includes talking about substance use health. This could be anything from coffee, to alcohol, to cannabis, to other substances you might use to help you sleep, manage stress, or get through the day. What are your thoughts regarding having a conversation about this? This helps me to understand what is important to you and what is important to you about your health."

"Many people that I work with have questions about their substance use health as it can affect their overall health, stress level, and coping in different ways. Sometimes, it may be a part of daily functioning. I'm interested in understanding what you think about your substance use health and how we can add that to our conversation at any visit."[2,5]

Stigmatizing Language vs Relational Approach



Adapted with permission from EQUIP Health Care (2025).[6]

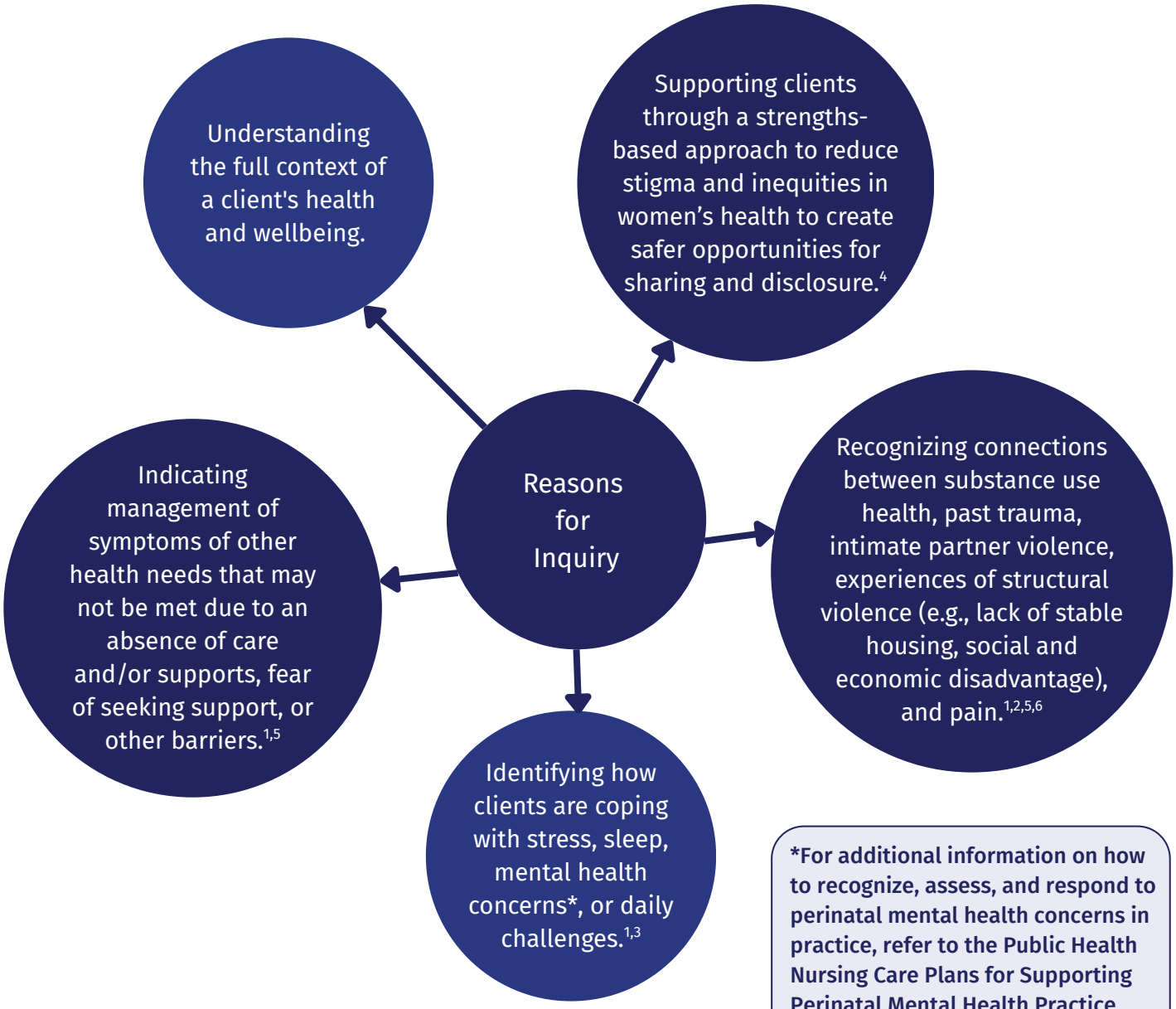
Considerations for Shifting from Screening to Assessment: Why This Matters

DEFINITIONS

Screening: Refers to making systematic observations with individuals to identify any risk factors. Early detection will allow for prompt, effective intervention to improve the screened individual's health outcome and quality of life.[8]

Assessment: The process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information to be able to evaluate the fulsome health status including strengths, risks, and goals to inform evidence-based interventions to improve overall health outcomes of a person, community and/or population.[9]

Why it is Important to Inquire about Substance Use Health



***For additional information on how to recognize, assess, and respond to perinatal mental health concerns in practice, refer to the Public Health Nursing Care Plans for Supporting Perinatal Mental Health Practice Guidance document.**

Shifting from screening, or the identification of risk or a limit / threshold, to assessment allows for public health nurses to understand the "how," "why," and "what" of a client's substance use health. This creates a better understanding of how substance use exists in a client's life, why it may be present, and then what role it plays. The use of assessment is relational, client-centered and context aware in conversations within the therapeutic relationship that builds over time and multiple visits.[1,2,3,5,6]

What to Do with This Information?

Once a public health nurse assesses and has a deeper understanding of a client's substance use health, they can:

- Explore the client's perception of current functioning (e.g., anxiety, fatigue, coping)
- Assess for impacts on client / child safety, early relational health and caregiving (parenting), client and child health
- Identify whether symptom management can be supported with other methods
- Provide education, validation, and information to support the client's goals
- Revisit the conversation over time as trust builds and circumstances evolve
- Explore for the experience of substance use and intimate partner violence*

The goal may not be abstinence or immediate change, but rather understanding and support.[2,5]

For additional information on responding to disclosures of intimate partner violence, visit the PHN-PREP resource *Intimate Partner Violence: Immediate Response to Disclosure

Guiding Principles for Public Health Nurses

Public health nurses can foster meaningful dialogue about the continuum of substance use health by adopting a relational, client-centered approach that prioritizes trust, curiosity, and collaboration without judgment. The following principles can guide practice to create safe spaces for these conversations, from assessment and through home visiting support.

1

Build the relationship with safety

- Establish trust before diving into sensitive topics
- Use non-judgmental language
- Normalize substance use as part of the health continuum

2

Initiate the conversation

- Develop a non-judgmental conversation opener to introduce the concept of substance use health to the discussion
- Invite the client to share their understanding and experiences to ensure the conversation is meaningful and relevant to them. Prioritize physical, emotional, and cultural safety to create a supportive environment where the client feels comfortable and safe discussing their experiences

3

Listen for context

- Be an active listener
- Listen for and understand the 'why' when a client describes their use of substances
- Connect substance use to broader life circumstances

- Use open-ended questions
- Display genuine curiosity and clarify for understanding
- Explore patterns, functions, and impacts

Assessment, not screening

4

- Recognize substance use health as a coping strategy in the absence of adequate supports
- Acknowledge the client's disclosure and telling of their story
- Offer resources and support aligned with client goals, where available

Provide support, not judgment

5

REMINDER: CHILD SAFETY RESPONSIBILITIES

Each public health nurse is responsible for understanding their role and accountability in assessing how a client's substance use health may affect the safety and well-being of children in their care.

Each public health nurse must be aware of their local and agency policies, protocols, and procedures for when and how to consult with child protection services.

References

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