

Language Tips - Mental Health Professionals

*Compiled by Katherine Koster for Sex Workers Outreach Project - Chicago with Emily Kissner

- Ask the client how they would like you to refer to the work that they do or their job.
- Do not make assumptions about a client's gender identity or sexual orientation based off of the work they do or the clients they have. Instead, ask, or listen and wait until they self-identify.
- Mirror the client's language on self-identification, clients, management, work activities and settings, and characterizations of feelings and behavior.
- Some clients may use language describing themselves that other clients might find offensive (e.g., "rent boy"), but avoid slang unless or until that is how clients self-identify.
- Some terminology or phrases clients may use, jokingly or while expressing frustration with work, may be stigmatizing if expressed by the therapist. If you feel awkward or uncomfortable using an 'insider' term [i.e., "Hustling," "trick," "john" "sugar daddy"], it's best to use a neutral, accepted equivalent rather than forcing it.
- Don't express assumptions about:
 - "risky behavior" in sex work.
 - connections (i.e., between presenting issues and sex work; past trauma and sex work; past relationships and sex work).
 - a certain way of understanding sex work.
 - a certain way of understanding client-interactions.

Instead, allow clients to make and share these discoveries him/herself, if relevant.

- Avoid language that implies assumptions about the cause of issues; rather, use neutral, non-judgemental language to facilitate self-discovery.
- Do not generalize experiences from one account-- client-interactions and work experiences can vary tremendously for the same worker in a short period of time, and do vary tremendously between workers in the same workplace or industry.
- It *can* be useful to group negative occupational experiences with those common in non-stigmatized occupations (i.e., "That's a common issue for therapists as well")
- It can also be useful to explore connections with self-identified negative experiences or behavior in sex work and behavior throughout the rest of an individual's life ("i.e. "You describe some of the behavior you engage in working as "risky." Do you feel that you also take risks in other aspects of your life?")
- Don't compare client-experiences with other sex worker experiences if the client differentiates him/herself from other workers or other types of sex work.
- If the client sets "developing other skills, professions, and relationships" as a goal, talk about this in terms of those goals, not in terms of "spending less time doing sex work" or "exiting the sex trade."
- Focus on possibilities, not limitations; honor frustrations, but don't perpetuate "impossibility."

Common stigmatizing language and terms

Problematic term/language	Preferred term
whore / hooker / prostitute	escort, courtesan, companion, adult worker, sex worker, street worker, individual involved in sex work, adult service provider,
rent boy / hustler / gigolo	male sex worker, male escort
“gay for pay”	male sex worker who has male clients
“Selling your body” “selling sex” “engaging in prostitution” “prostituting yourself”	“dating” “working” “seeing a client” “offering sexual/adult services” “doing what you have to do to get by”
stripper	dancer, adult entertainer
prostitution	adult work, sex work, escorting
pornography	adult film, porn, adult entertainer

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