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Inclusive strategies for discussing substance use with clients who may have communication barriers or cognitive differences.

“ASK DIFFERENTLY” - COMMUNICATION ADAPTATION TIPS

1. REFRAME YES/NO QUESTIONS

~~“Have
you been
using
drugs?”~~

“Some people use substances to cope, to manage pain, or just to feel better. Has that been part of your experience lately?”

2. SLOW DOWN & SIMPLIFY

Use short, clear questions:

- “When did you last feel okay?”
- “What’s helped you get through hard times before?”

Avoid jargon:

- ~~✗~~ “Any polysubstance misuse?”
- ✓ “Are you using more than one substance right now?”

3. NORMALIZE DISCLOSURE

“Everyone copes differently. I ask all my clients about substance use because it helps us understand what support you might need.”

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4. OFFER MULTIPLE MODALITIES

Let clients respond by:

- Writing
- Pointing to images or checklists
- Using AAC (augmentative communication tools)
- Typing responses

5. RESPECT SHUTDOWNS & PAUSES

If a client goes silent or disengages:

- “Would it help if we take a break or come back to this later?”
- “Was that question uncomfortable? I want to make sure I’m asking in a way that works for you.”

BONUS TIP: OFFER CHOICES

- “Would you rather write this down or talk through it?”
- “Do you want me to explain what I mean by substance use before we go on?”

**INCLUSIVE CARE STARTS WITH INCLUSIVE
QUESTIONS. THE WAY WE ASK MATTERS AS
MUCH AS WHAT WE ASK.**

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