

Stigma and Substance Use Disorder

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Stigma

- Stigma is a word that comes from the Latin and Greek, and originally meant a burn tattoo or other mark inflicted on another person to signify their disgrace.
- Today, it could include labeling, stereotyping and discrimination.
- People with substance use disorders often have disparaging or judgmental terms to describe them.

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/stigma-of-addiction>



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What causes stigma with people that have substance use disorders?

- Research points to the problem with stigma is that people have a belief that addiction is a personal choice due to a lack of willpower and moral failure.
- Stigma against people that have a substance use disorders are present in the general public and health care professionals.
- Research demonstrates that stigma damages the health and well-being of people with substance use disorders and interferes with the quality of care they receive.
- Any effort to address the drug overdose crisis must first include action to address and reduce stigma among people that have substance use disorders.

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/stigma-of-addiction> Reducing the Stigma of Addiction The Words Matter



National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) addresses stigma

- There are negative attitudes and stereotypes against people with substance use disorders that can cause barriers to treatment and make their conditions worse.
- Research shows the inappropriate language people use can contribute to stigma and discrimination against people with substance use disorders. As a result, persons with substance use disorders might:
 - Not seek care that is needed or necessary
 - Fear disclosing their substance use
 - Receive a poor quality of care
 - Have reduced access to health programs to help them
 - May increase their substance use

<https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/stigma-discrimination#research> June 2022



Stigma and substance use disorders

- Opioid use disorder, one form of addiction, is a chronic neurobiological brain disease caused by the effects of opioids on brain structure and function.
- There are neurobiological changes in the brain that can cause addiction, but this can be treated with medications for opioid treatment.
- These medications along with behavioral therapy can help patients regain a quality of life and restore relationships that might have been fractured due to their substance use.
- Because most patients fear facing stigma when encountering treatment, they put off or delay seeking health care.

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Words Matter

- Research indicates that the use of “person-first” language is essential for stigma reduction.
- Focus on the person and not his/her condition.
- Research has shown best to use person-first language such as “a person with substance use disorder” than “substance abuser” to decrease the stigma.

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Instead of ...

- Substance abuse/drug abuse
- Drug habit
- Abuser, drug abuser, addict, alcoholic, drunk, junkie, user
- Addicted baby
- Problem
- Clean (person)
- Clean (or dirty) toxicology results
- Substitution therapy, replacement therapy, medication-assisted treatment

Use...

- Substance use disorder
- Addiction
- Person with a substance use disorder
- Babies exposed to opioids
- Risky, unhealthy or heavy use
- In recovery
- Negative (or positive) toxicology results
- Medication for opioid or alcohol use disorder

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Trauma-Informed Approach To Care

- To combat stigma when working with pregnant and postpartum persons with substance use disorders, caregivers should:
 - Utilize a *trauma-informed approach* to care.
 - The care must include harm reduction principles.
 - Motivational interviewing with a focus on building trust, enhancing self-efficacy, and strengthening should be incorporated.



In Summary:

- **What can we do as health care providers to reduce stigma for pregnant and postpartum persons who use substances?**
 - Be aware if you have any stigma.
 - Seek help if you have stigma to address your biases or prejudice.
 - Understand that people who use substances have a chronic neurobiological brain disease and need help.
 - Understand the pathophysiology of substance use, this is a chronic disease and not a moral failure.
 - Speak up and educate others in the healthcare profession to reduce the stigma.
 - Develop a *trauma-informed approach* to care to reduce stigma.



References

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