Reducing Stigma

A collaborative **Harm Reduction** presentation by the
Lewis County Health Department and **Fresh Start Health**

Fresh Start Health

Agenda

What is Stigma?

The Impact of Stigma

Stigma and Language

The Importance of Addressing Stigma

What is Stigma?

Defining Stigma

To understand stigma, we must first understand how the human mind sorts through the millions of images, messages, and thoughts that occur every day. Sorting is based around characteristics of difference. When the sorting includes an evaluation of someone's social worthiness in our society, it becomes a stigmatizing action. One of the ways we are sorted is by whether we use drugs or not. This sorting is not done in isolation but almost always intersects with structures of discrimination based on race, class, gender, migrant or immigrant status, and other characteristics (C4 Innovations, 2021)

Defining Stigma (cont.)

Patrick Corrigan, principal investigator at the National Consortium for Stigma and Empowerment, provides additional clarity by distilling **stigma** into **three parts**: **stereotyping**, which has to do with thoughts and **assumptions**; **prejudice**, which includes **negative feelings**; and **discrimination**, which results in **changed behavior** and access to opportunity for stigmatized groups (Corrigan & Kosyluk, 2014).

Three Categories of Stigma

Micro or
Self-stigma

Meso or
Public
Stigma

Macro or
Structural
Stigma

Micro or Self-stigma

Those who are stigmatized can internalize the negative judgments that are said about and to them. In some cases, the way people look at us can trigger these internalized judgment scripts. Beyond storing these experiences, we begin to believe them. We keep them active, developing structures of shame and guilt that can cause us to spiral into isolation, loss of will, and feelings of hopelessness.

Meso of Public Stigma

Public stigma is how we think about others, not just individuals, but groups. Public stigma involves three processes: labeling differences, connecting those differences to stereotypes, and separating or sorting "us" from "them" to ensure that the stigmatized people experience a marked loss in social status. Public stigma occurs in our closest circles of relationships. These are our family and community ties and our relationships with our recovery peers and, in some cases, those who provide treatment and care.

Macro or Structural Stigma

Structural stigmas are the laws, policies, protocols, and practices that produce and maintain stigma at local, regional, and national levels and within institutions and organizations, such as healthcare and criminal justice settings. Stigmas are often collectively held. That is, they are a social norm. Together, most of society agrees that some people—for example, the "homeless," "addicts," "illegals"—are problematic and need to distance from everyone else

Examples of Stigma

Micro or Self-stigma

Scenario: A person in recovery from substance use disorder (SUD) confides in a friend, who responds dismissively, saying, "You did this to yourself."

Aspects:

- **Source:** The stigma comes from the individual's interpersonal relationship (their friend).

- **Manifestation:** Judgment and lack of empathy toward the individual's struggle with SUD.

- **Impact:** The person feels shame and self-blame, making them less likely to seek support or continue their recovery journey.

Meso or Public Stigma

Scenario: A local hospital has an unspoken policy of deprioritizing patients with SUD, assuming they are "drug-seeking."

Aspects:

- **Source:** Stigma stems from the institution's culture, policies, or staff attitudes.

- **Manifestation:** Staff may delay pain management or avoid treating the patient's complaints seriously.

- **Impact:** Patients with SUD avoid seeking medical care due to fear of discrimination, worsening their health outcomes.

Macro or Structural Stigma

Scenario: Federal drug policies focus on punitive measures, such as mandatory minimum sentences for drug possession, over funding treatment programs.

Aspects:

- **Source:** The stigma is systemic, rooted in laws and government priorities.

- **Manifestation:** People with SUD are criminalized, perpetuating the narrative that substance use is a moral failure rather than a health condition.

- **Impact:** Limited access to evidence-based treatment options and continued marginalization of people with SUD in society.

The Impact of Stigma

How does stigma interfere with a person's life?
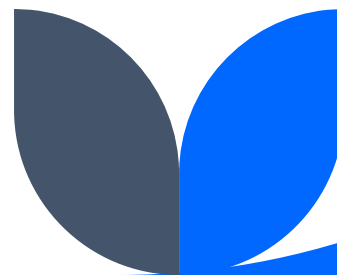
Social Determinates of Health

The American Academy of Family Physicians (2019) defines the social determinants of health as being "the conditions under which people are born, grow, live, work, and age that can significantly impact an individuals' nonmedical and social needs outcomes."

Economic Stability

Education Access and Quality

Health Care Access and Quality

Neighborhood and Built Environment

Social and Community Context

How Stigma Effects a Person

Stigma interferes with an individual's full societal participation while stripping them of dignity and self-respect. Stigma's impact on an individual's treatment access and participation can destroy self-esteem, isolate and marginalize the individual, and create a pervasive sense of hopelessness

- Prejudice and discrimination

- Fear and shame

- Distrust and disgrace

- Stereotyping and rejection

- Anger and frustration

- Avoidance of treatment and inadequate coverage

- Ostracism and denial of rights

How Stigmas are Used and Sustained

Goal	Explanation
Maintain Distance	Stigmas provide excuses for people to distance themselves and ignore people with whom they don't want to associate: "They are not like us."
Hurt Others	Stigmas are a way for people to purposefully hurt others and brand them as unworthy of love, patience, or opportunities.
Express Disapproval	Stigmas are ways in which people can express disapproval of the behavior of others and discourage behavior that they are uncomfortable with.
Feel Superior	Stigmas allow one group of people to feel superior to another group: "I'm better than they are."
Feel Safe	Stigmas permit one group of people to feel safe and less vulnerable: "That can't happen to me."
Promote Agendas	Stigmas permit people to discredit other people to promote their own personal and social agendas, goals, and objectives.
Control Others	Stigmas allow one group of people to control another group by attempting to diminish the wholeness of people down to stereotypes.
Express Fear	Stigmas allow people to express their fears about the beliefs and behaviors of other people in seemingly socially acceptable ways.

Stop and Think.

Stigma fuels inequality and is a powerful motivator for silence, isolation, and avoidance of activities that identify, perpetuate, or highlight an individual's particular challenge.

For example, individuals may refuse to participate in treatment because it outs them as person with a substance use disorder.

Can you see how stigma keeps people from reaching their *and our* goal of sobriety and recovery?
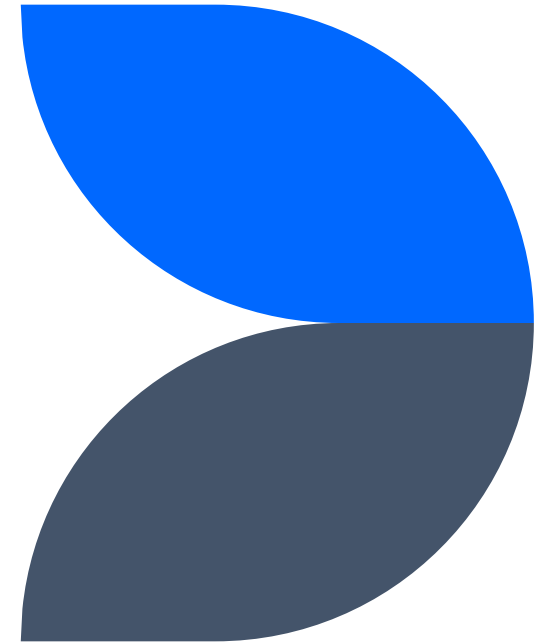
Other Impacts

•**Shame and Internalized Stigma:** Individuals begin to see themselves as failures or morally flawed, hindering their self-esteem and recovery efforts.

•**Isolation:** Fear of judgment leads individuals to withdraw from social circles, increasing loneliness and worsening mental health.

•**Avoidance of Treatment:** Fear of being "outed" or labeled prevents individuals from seeking potentially life-saving care.

•**Delayed Diagnosis:** Reluctance to disclose symptoms to healthcare providers leads to untreated or worsening conditions.

•**Loss of Identity:** Individuals may feel defined solely by their substance use disorder or mental health challenges.

•**Courtesy Stigma**: Family members, friends, or close associates of the individual face judgment, exclusion, or discrimination by association.

•**Broken Relationships**: Stigma-fueled shame and secrecy strain relationships with loved ones.

•**Distrust of Community**: Individuals may feel unwelcome in community spaces, leading to disengagement and further marginalization.

•**Job Loss or Denied Employment**: Employers may discriminate against individuals with a history of substance use or mental health treatment.

•**Housing Discrimination**: Landlords may refuse to rent to individuals based on stigma, making stable living conditions harder to obtain.

•**Financial Strain**: Limited job opportunities and ongoing stigma contribute to cycles of poverty and economic hardship.

•**Inadequate Resources:** Public health systems underfund services due to societal stigma, leaving individuals without necessary support.

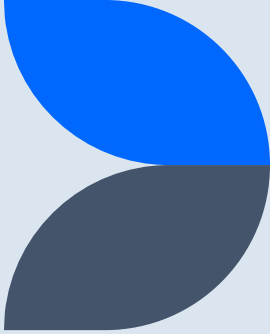# Stigma and Language

Recovery Research Institute Study
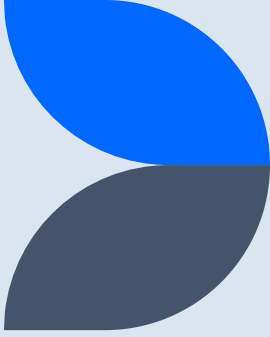
Participants were asked how they felt about two people who were currently using alcohol or drugs. For the study, one person was identified as a **"substance abuser"** and the other participant was labeled as **"having a substance use disorder."**

When researchers used the term substance abuser, participants' perceptions about the individual were mostly negative:
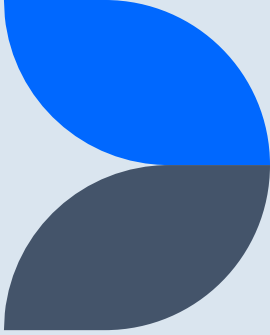
- Less likely to benefit from treatment

- More likely to benefit from punishment

- More likely to be socially threatening

- More likely to be blamed for the substance-related difficulties and it was less likely that their problem resulted from an innate dysfunction over which they had no control

- Less likely to control their substance use without help

Changing Our Vocabulary

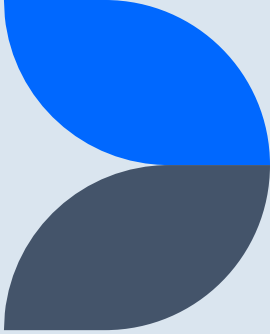| Term	Problem with Terminology	Preferred Terminology
Addict, Abuser, Junkie	These terms are demeaning because they label people by their illness. By making no distinction between the person and the disease, the terms deny the person's dignity and humanity. In addition, these labels imply a permanency to the condition, leaving no room for a change in status	• Person in active addiction • Person with a substance use disorder • Person experiencing an alcohol or drug problem • Patient (when referring to an individual receiving treatment services)

Changing Our Vocabulary

Term	Problem with Terminology	Preferred Terminology
Abuse	Although abuse is a clinical diagnosis in the DSM–IV and ICD–10 code, the term is stigmatizing because of these factors: • It negates the fact that addictive disorders are a medical condition • It blames the illness solely on the individual with the illness, ignoring environmental and genetic factors, as well as the ability of substances to alter brain chemistry • It absolves those selling and promoting addictive substances of any wrong doing • It feeds into the stigma experienced not only by individuals with addictive disorders, but also family members and the addiction treatment field	• Misuse • Harmful use • Inappropriate use • Hazardous use • Problem use • Risky use

Changing Our Vocabulary

Term	Problem with Terminology	Preferred Terminology
Clean or Dirty	Commonly used to describe drug test results, these terms are stigmatizing because they associate illness symptoms (that is, positive drug tests) with filth	• Negative • Positive • Substance-free
Habit or Drug Habit	Calling addictive disorders a habit denies the medical nature of the condition and implies that resolution of the problem is simply a matter of willpower in being able to stop the habitual behavior	• Substance misuse disorder • Alcohol and drug disorder • Alcohol and drug disease • Active addiction

Changing Our Vocabulary

Term	Problem with Terminology	Preferred Terminology
Replacement or Substitution Therapy	These terms imply that treatment medications such as buprenorphine are equal to street drugs like heroin. The terms suggest a lateral move from illegal addiction to legal addiction. This does not accurately characterize the true nature of this clinical treatment. The essence of addiction is uncontrollable compulsive behavior. The first goal of addiction treatment is to stop this dangerous addictive behavior. With successful buprenorphine therapy as part of a comprehensive treatment plan, the dangerous addictive behavior is stopped, not replaced.	• Treatment • Medication-assisted treatment or MAT • Medication-assisted recovery • Medications for opioid use disorder • Medication

Changing Our Vocabulary

| Term	Problem with Terminology	Preferred Terminology
User	The term is stigmatizing because it labels individuals by their behavior. It is also misleading because the term user has come to refer to one who is engaged in risky misuse of substances, although use alone is not necessarily problematic.	When referring to use: • Person who uses alcohol or drugs When referring to misuse: • Person engaged in risky use of substance

The Importance of Addressing Stigma

Why trying matters.

The Importance of Addressing Stigma
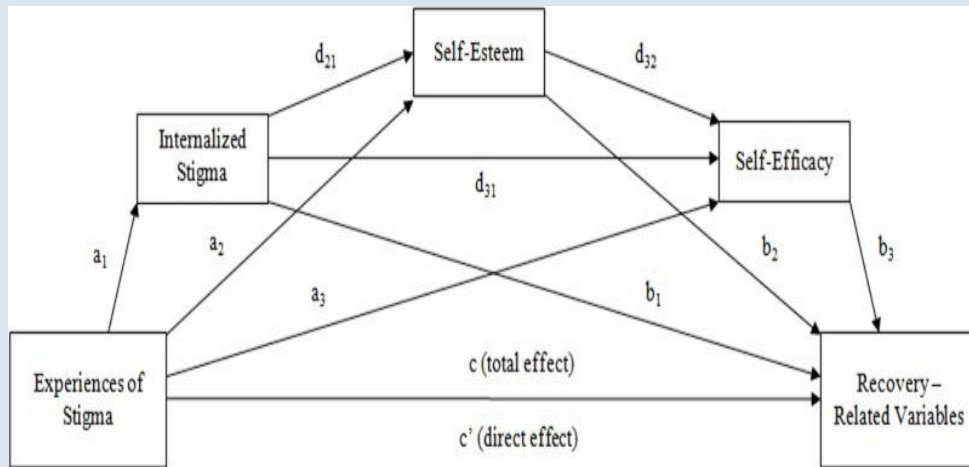
Stigmatizing actions drive a wedge between "us" and "them." Once we separate ourselves from the people we stigmatize, we make sure they lose their social position, which means that they lose status or standing and legitimacy in the community. As the group abandons stigmatized individuals, the group effectively silences the stigmatized in the process, eliminating opportunities to recover.

Experience of Stigma:

Scenario: A patient overdoses and is revived by emergency responders using naloxone. While providing care, one responder says, "Here we go again. Some people just don't learn."

Impact: The patient, who is conscious, overhears the comment and feels judged and devalued.

Internalization of Stigma:

Thought Process: The patient begins to believe, "I am a burden," or "I'm not worth saving."

Behavioral Impact: This internalized stigma fosters feelings of guilt and shame, reinforcing negative beliefs about their self-worth.

Effect on Self-Esteem:

Outcome: The patient's self-esteem deteriorates further. They think, "If even the people saving my life don't believe in me, why should I?"

Cycle of Negativity: This erosion of self-esteem leads the patient to view recovery as an unattainable goal.

Effect on Recovery-Related Variables:

Avoidance of Treatment: The patient avoids seeking treatment because they fear more judgment or feel unworthy of help.

Relapse Risk: Internalized stigma and low self-esteem increase feelings of hopelessness, making relapse more likely.

Reduced Engagement: If the patient does enter treatment, they may struggle to engage fully, believing they don't deserve to succeed.

Final Take Away

- Stigma can be on a personal, public, or structural level

  o Efforts should be made to reduce stigma to affect change (encourage people to recover)

- The way we speak about substance use affects how people perceive themselves

  o Changing vocabulary is a simple way to create the change we want to see in our community

- Social Determinates of Health are linked to each other and stigmas we place upon people

Thank you

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Credits

C4 Innovations, Georgia Health Policy Center, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Hatzenbuehler, M., Jr., Corrigan, P., Kosyluk, K., World Health Organization, & Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2021). A toolkit for identifying, deconstructing, and reducing stigma.

Jahn, D. R., Leith, J., Muralidharan, A., Brown, C. H., Drapalski, A. L., Hack, S., & Lucksted, A. (2019). The influence of experiences of stigma on recovery: Mediating roles of internalized stigma, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 43(2), 97–105. https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000377