

## Addressing Stigma of Substance Use Disorders

Substance use disorder is a treatable chronic health condition from which people can and do recover. However, many people with substance use disorders do not seek the treatment they need because of the stigma they face. People with substance use disorders may be viewed more negatively than people with other disorders and disabilities - even by their health care providers. **ALL West Virginians can play a role in reducing stigma and encouraging treatment for those who need it.**

**STIGMA**  
A collection of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and structures that generate negative attitudes about people with a condition.

### WAYS TO REDUCE STIGMA



#### Change Our Language and Labels

Replace words like “addict” and “junkie” with “person with substance use disorder.”



#### Learn About the Issue

Education reduces stigma. Learn about the science of addiction; mental health and substance use disorders; the science of trauma; and treatment with medication.



#### Personal Experiences

Positive interactions with people with stigmatized conditions can change attitudes. Invite people to share their story.



#### Review Practices and Policies

Review workplace and other policies and practices. Support policies that increase access to services, compliance with treatment, and overall health and well-being.

### TYPES OF STIGMA

**PUBLIC OR SOCIETAL STIGMA** is the public’s reaction to individuals with a stigmatizing condition such as substance use disorders or other behavioral health issues.

**PERSONAL OR SELF STIGMA** is the internalization of publicly stigmatized beliefs. Self stigma can result in shame, guilt, reduced sense of hope, social withdrawal and isolation, and a decrease in compliance with treatment.

**COURTESY STIGMA** is stigma directed toward family and friends of those with a stigmatized condition. Courtesy stigma can isolate family members, lead family members to feel guilty, create a sense of shame, and can make the family member less likely to encourage treatment.

**STRUCTURAL STIGMA** includes laws, policies, and procedures that limit the opportunities of people with substance use disorder or other behavioral health issues. Structural stigma can be found in businesses, organizations, the courts, government, school systems, and social services.

# What Can You Do?



Listen with respect to individuals with behavioral health issues. Listen without judgment. Treat all people with dignity, respect, and compassion.

Speak out against stigma. Speak out online and in person. Consider sharing your story.

Avoid using hurtful labels. Challenge your own assumptions and stereotypes. We all have them.

Promote anti-stigma programs and policies in the workplace and community.

Counter misinformation with evidence-based facts. Learn and share information about substance use disorders with friends, family, and coworkers.

Support harm reduction strategies in your community such as needle exchange programs, naloxone training and distribution, and treatment with medication.



## HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

Many health care providers treat patients with substance use disorders differently and have lower expectations for health outcomes for those patients. Health care providers play an important role to reduce the burden of stigma. Using language that supports pro-health activities, even if a person is actively using substances, can help decrease stigma.



## MEDIA

- Report on substance use disorders and treatment in the same way you would other chronic medical conditions such as diabetes or cancer.
- Use person-first language – put the person first, and the disease second – “a person with substance use disorder.” Avoid using stigmatizing terms.
- Share solutions that exist. Many patients fully recover and go on to lead productive lives. Share accounts of how people are responding to effective evidence-based solutions.
- Humanize the condition – use language that humanizes and personalizes the condition and avoid using fear and blame tactics.
- Use reliable sources – identify potential biases in source materials and provide a variety of voices.
- Communicate the many different pathways to recovery.
- Share the long-term view. Substance use disorder is a chronic disease and it can take years to recover.
- Be respectful – many families have experienced the loss of loved ones to substance use disorder. Be respectful in tone.

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/addiction-recovery-101/201801/communicating-about-addiction-accuracy-or-alienation>



For more information, go to: [StigmaFreeWV.org](http://StigmaFreeWV.org)

### SOURCES:

- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2016. Ending Discrimination Against People with Mental and Substance Use Disorders: The Evidence for Stigma Change. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/23442>.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma. Reference #HHSS283201200024/HHSS28342002T. November 2017. <http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/>
- Kelly, John F. "Communicating About Addiction: Accuracy or Alienation?" Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 23 Jan. 2018. [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/addiction-recovery-101/201801/communicating-about-addiction-accuracy-or-alienation](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/addiction-recovery-101/201801/communicating-about-addiction-accuracy-or-alienation).
- Botticelli, Michael P. Memorandum: Changing Federal Terminology Regarding Substance Use and Substance Use Disorders. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/images/Memo%20-%20Changing%20Federal%20Terminology%20Regarding%20Substance%20Use%20and%20Substance%20Use%20Disorders.pdf>
- Otto, Jay. Addressing Stigma: WV Stigma Webinar. <https://stigmafreewv.org/training-evaluation-resources/>