

Addressing Stigma to Improve Care Experience

By Heli Mehta, Senior Consultant, ESCN

Approximately 11 Canadians die every day from apparent opioid related incidents. Overdose-related deaths are affecting our friends, families and communities and it's a nationwide problem. Unfortunately, those affected often don't ask for help because they feel scared or ashamed and continue to be stigmatized.ⁱ

What is stigma?

Stigma refers to negative attitudes and beliefs about a group of people and their circumstances in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgement, labels, isolation and stereotypes.¹

There are three types of stigma:

1. **Social Stigma:** negative attitudes towards or ignoring people who use substance or towards their friends and family members
2. **Structural Stigma:** social stigma from people who offer services to the public by ignoring people affected by substance use, or not taking their requests seriously and connecting them to appropriate services
3. **Self-stigma:** when someone internalizes social and structural stigma by taking the negative messages people see about people who use drugs and apply them to themselves¹

Why does stigma matter?

Stigma creates barriers to accessing health and social services for substance use. Stigma can make people feel ashamed of their substance use which can prevent them from receiving help if they need or want it. Sadly, this often leads people to use substances alone, which can in turn lead to overdosing and dying alone¹. Stigma can further lead to social isolation due to exclusion from activities and low levels of health service utilization.ⁱⁱ



Things you can do to reduce stigma?

1. Know the facts	Educate yourself about substance use disorders.
2. Be aware of your attitudes and behaviour	Examine your own judgmental thinking, reinforced by upbringing and society.
3. Choose your words carefully	The way we speak can affect the attitudes of others.
4. Educate others	Pass on facts and positive attitudes; challenge myths and stereotypes.
5. Focus on the positive	Substance use is only part of anyone's larger picture.
6. Support people	Treat everyone with dignity and respect; offer support and encouragement.
7. Include everyone	It's against the law to deny jobs or services to anyone with these health issues. ³

Why words matter?

Choosing our words carefully is an important step toward reducing the cycle of stigma surrounding people who use drugs. What we say and how we say it can have a profound impact on those suffering around us. By using compassionate words in place of negative ones, you can make it easier for someone to speak up, to feel heard and understood, or to receive help.⁴

Two key principles include:

- Using neutral, medically accurate terminology when describing substance use
- Using “people-first” language, that focuses first on the individual or individuals, not the action (e.g. “people who use drugs”)⁴

Related Resources:

- [Health Canada - Stigma Around Substance Use](#)
- [Canadian Mental Health Association: Stigma](#)
- [The Acceptance Project](#)
- [Changing how we talk about substance use](#)
- [Opioid overdose: wallet card](#)
- [Stigma: Why Words Matter \(fact sheet\)](#)

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¹ Health Canada. (2019, April 18). Stigma around substance use. Retrieved April 23, 2019, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/problematic-prescription-drug-use/opioids/stigma.html>

² The Acceptance Project: Reducing stigma and discrimination towards mental illness and substance use problems among community health centre staff. (2018, July 23). Retrieved April 23, 2019, from <http://eenet.ca/resource/acceptance-project-reducing-stigma-and-discrimination-towards-mental-illness-and-substance>

³ Addressing Stigma. (n.d.). Retrieved April 23, 2019, from <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/addressing-stigma>

⁴ Government of Canada. (n.d.). CHANGING HOW WE TALK ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE. Retrieved April 23, 2019, from <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/documents/services/substance-abuse/prescription-drug-abuse/opioids/stigma/substance-use-eng.pdf>

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