

Stigma: Why Words Matter

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**.

How does stigma affect people who use opioids?

Stigma can have a major **impact** on the **quality of life of people** who use opioids, people who are in recovery, and their friends and families.

Stigma **creates barriers** to accessing health and social services for substance use. Stigma can **make people feel ashamed** of their drug use which **can prevent them from receiving help** if they need or want it. Sadly, this often leads people to use drugs alone, which can in turn lead to overdosing and dying alone.

There are three types of stigma:

- 1. Social stigma** – when you have **negative attitudes** or behaviours **toward people** who **use drugs** or their loved ones
- 2. Structural stigma** – when **health care providers or first responders ignore** or do not take people with problematic substance use seriously
- 3. Self-stigma** – when people **apply to themselves** the **negative attitudes and beliefs** that they have heard from others



Why words matter

Choosing our words carefully is an important first 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**.

A small change can help reduce the cycle of stigma

- ✓ **Listen with compassion and without judgement**, so that a person who uses drugs feels heard and understood
- ✓ **Speak up** when someone is being treated disrespectfully because of their substance use
- ✓ **Words matter. Be kind with the words you use. Use people-first language:**
 - Instead of "junkie" use "a person who uses drugs"
 - Instead of "addicts" use "people who have used drugs"
 - Instead of "drug abuse" use "problematic substance use"

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