

Understanding Substance Use Stigma



Recovery from addiction is much more likely in nonjudgmental, supportive environments. The Understanding Substance Use Stigma tip sheet explores the different ways stigma might be experienced by people living with substance use disorders. You can also read about ways to promote recovery through respect and compassion in your work.

Stigma is a mark of disgrace that sets a person apart from others. Negative attitudes and beliefs create prejudice, which leads to negative actions and discrimination.



Seven ways stigma contributes to addiction include:

1. Increasing shame and isolation from family, friends, and community
2. Preventing people from seeking help
3. Limiting treatment availability
4. Limiting the amount of substance use treatment covered by health insurance
5. Pushing people toward treatment that's not based on science
6. Treating people with an addiction as criminals
7. Creating social and structural barriers to recovery, such as difficulty getting and keeping a job and staying employed

There are three types of stigma:

Public stigma: negative attitudes and fears that isolate those with addiction

Structural stigma: excluding those with addiction from opportunities and resources

Self-stigma: believing negative stereotypes about oneself

Access to treatment is not equal among racial groups. White Americans get treatment more easily and quickly than Black or Hispanic Americans due to decades of discriminatory and racist policies, laws, practices, and beliefs. It is important to understand that Black and Hispanic Americans experience other stigmas in addition to the broader addiction stigmas mentioned above.

People are more likely to get treatment and recover when their families, friends, providers, and communities support them without judging them. Choose supportive, respectful, and nonjudgmental words that treat people with respect and compassion.

What can you do?

- Learn the facts about addiction.
- Speak out when you hear something stigmatizing, and question people's misunderstandings and stereotypes.
- Talk about substance use and addiction using respectful language.
- Respect the dignity and humanity of all people including people experiencing addiction; see the whole person.
- Listen when people are sharing their story.

For more information about how Head Start programs can help people with substance use problems, visit:

[The Journey to Recovery: Head Start Takes Action on Substance Use Disorders](#)

[Talking with Families About Substance Use Disorders: Screening and Consultation](#)

[Head Start Programs Support Families in Recovery](#)
[Ending the Stigma of Addiction](#)



National Center on
Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety

1-888-227-5125
health@ecetta.info
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health>

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