The Stigma of Substance Use: Its Impact and What You Can Do

September 29, 2022
Community Overdose Engagement (CODE) Technical Assistance Workshop
Participants will increase knowledge about:

- The definition, manifestations, and impact of stigma.
- The human side of overdose prevention and public health.
- Why choosing the “right” words matters.
- Strategies to address stigma in and out of the work environment.
What Is Stigma?

humiliated
discrimination
shame
dishonor
disgraced
scorned
isolated
different
prejudice
guilty
devalued
rejected
What Is Stigma?
What Is Stigma?

stigma  noun
/'stɪɡmə/

Definition of stigma
1. A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

Synonyms for stigma
Shame, disgrace, dishonor, humiliation, and (bad) reputation.
Why Does Stigma Still Exist?

2018 Survey:
• 20.3 million individuals 12+ experienced a substance use disorder in the past year.

Why does stigma still exist?
• Humans can be judgmental/learned behavior
• Compassion fatigue
• Lack of education and excess of misinformation
• Systemic stigma: racism, classism, etc.
• Others?
Four Types of Stigma

- Structural Stigma
- Public Stigma
- Self-Stigma
- Stigma by Association

Source: Four Types of Stigma, Pryor & Reeder, 2011
Four Types of Stigma

**Public Stigma:** People’s social and psychological reactions.

**Self-Stigma:** Social and psychological impact of being part of a stigmatized group, which perpetuates negative beliefs and feelings associated with the stigmatized condition.

**Stigma by Association:** Social and psychological reactions to people associated with a stigmatized person (e.g., family and friends).

**Structural Stigma:** “Legitimatization and perpetuation of a stigmatized status by society’s institutions and ideological systems.”
Human Side of Overdose Prevention and Public Health
In 2021, fatal overdoses for which **any drug** contributed to cause of death were **13% higher** than in 2020.

Source: Office of the State Medical Examiners (OSME), Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH). Data updated as of June 14, 2022.

Note: Data reflect accidental drug overdose deaths and do not include suicides, homicides, or undetermined deaths.
Each number has a name and a face.

A parent, a sibling, a child, a partner, a spouse, a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker…

Different Perspectives
Of all cocaine-involved overdoses in 2021, about **4 out of 5 (78%)** were fentanyl related.

Source: Office of the State Medical Examiners (OSME), Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH). Data updated as of June 14, 2022. Note: Data reflect accidental drug overdose deaths and do not include suicides, homicides, or undetermined deaths.
Into Practice: After

In 2021, about **4 out of 5 (78%)** people who died from a cocaine-involved overdose also had fentanyl in their system.

Source: Office of the State Medical Examiners (OSME), Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH). Data updated as of June 14, 2022. Note: Data reflect accidental drug overdose deaths and do not include suicides, homicides, or undetermined deaths.
Ms. J is a 44-year-old female with a long history of polysubstance abuse with poor compliance with outpatient treatment and little insight into her addiction who presents complaining of pain and swelling in her right lower extremity. She also has a history of drug-seeking behavior. I suspect this and homelessness are the primary reasons for her visit (i.e., secondary gain).
Ms. J is a 44-year-old female with a past medical history of substance use who presents with pain and swelling in her right lower extremity. She has previously been lost to follow-up in outpatient treatment possibly due to housing insecurity.
The Real Stigma of Substance Use Disorders

In a study by the Recovery Research Institute, participants were asked how they felt about two people “actively using drugs and alcohol.”

One person was referred to as a “substance abuser”

The other person as “having a substance use disorder”

No further information was given about these hypothetical individuals.

THE STUDY DISCOVERED THAT PARTICIPANTS FELT THE "SUBSTANCE ABUSER" WAS:

- less likely to benefit from treatment
- more likely to benefit from punishment
- more likely to be socially threatening
- more likely to be blamed for their substance related difficulties and less likely that their problem was the result of an innate dysfunction over which they had no control
- they were more able to control their substance use without help
Perception versus Reality

• Language frames what the public thinks about substance use and recovery.
• Language negatively and positively impacts the way society perceives substance use.
• Language can depersonalize people. ⁴
Moving Toward Recovery-Oriented Language

**Stigmatizing**
- Clean
- Addict/Alcoholic
- Relapse Prevention
- Substance Abuse/Dependence
- Dirty/Clean Screen/Urine
- Illegal Drugs
- Crazy
- Diagnosis first

**Recovery Oriented**
- In recovery
- Person in recovery
- Recovery Maintenance
- Substance Use
- Positive/Negative Screen
- Substances
- Sick/ill
- Person first
Breakout Group Discussions
1) Share a time when you may have witnessed or engaged in behavior or language that was stigmatizing.

   Example: You were with a friend or family member who made a comment about how a person who suffers from substance use disorder needs to “help themselves” or “did it to themselves.”

2) How was this perspective and language harmful?

3) In retrospect, what could you or a bystander have done differently?
Strategies to Reduce Stigma
GOOD NEWS!
WE CAN CHANGE OUR LANGUAGE.
THERE IS NO COST AND
THERE IS NO DOWNSIDE!

SO... HOW DO WE DO IT?

PUT THE PERSON FIRST.
A MEDICAL CONDITION
IS THE PROBLEM,
NOT THE PERSON.

BE KIND
You Can Make A Difference to Reduce Stigma

• **Correct negative language** that can cause stigma by sharing accurate information about addiction.

• **Speak out against negative behaviors and statements**, including those on social media.

• **Make sure the images used in communications show diverse communities** and do not reinforce stereotypes.
Questions?
Thank You!
References


