

The Opioid Epidemic: Supporting the Community and Reducing Stigma

Stigma refers to negative beliefs and attitudes toward a person or group of people due to a perceived characteristic.¹ Stigma can result in people being rejected or feared by their peers.² People who use drugs are among the most stigmatized groups in our society.

How Can We Reduce Stigma?

Self-Education and Spreading Awareness

Know the Facts: **Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)**

- Opioids reduce the perception of pain and create a sense of euphoria.³ These positive feelings make it likely that people will continue to use opioids even if they experience negative symptoms.³
- Opioid withdrawal symptoms are very severe, making it difficult to stop use without proper treatment.³
- Drug dependence is a chronic relapsing brain disorder, which means that one round of treatment may not be sufficient.⁴ This highlights the need for continuing support.
- Between 3% and 19% of people who take prescription opioids develop an addiction to them.³

Words Matter

Words are powerful. They can contribute to stigma and create barriers to accessing effective treatment. **Use person-first language; focus on the person, not the disorder.**

When discussing opioid or other substance abuse disorders avoid these terms:

Addict, user, drug abuser, junkie	Person/patient with opioid use disorder or person/patient with opioid addiction
Addicted baby	Baby born with neonatal abstinence syndrome
Opioid abuse or opioid dependence	Opioid use disorder
Problem	Disease
Habit	Drug addiction
Clean or dirty urine test	Positive or negative urine drug test
Opioid substitution or replacement therapy	Opioid agonist treatment
Relapse	Return to use
Treatment failure	Treatment attempt
Being clean	Being in remission or recovery

SOURCES

1. "Definitions of Stigma and Discrimination." Disability Rights California.
2. Gluck, Samantha. "What Is Stigma?" Healthy Place.
3. Bachhuber, Marcus A., et al. "Messaging to increase public support for naloxone distribution policies in the United States." PloS one 10.7 (2015): e0130050.
4. National Research Council. Understanding the demand for illegal drugs. National Academies Press, 2010.
5. "Opioid Use Disorder." American Psychiatric Association.

Using Compassionate Language

When we change the way we think, talk about, and treat people who use drugs, we create a more supportive and inclusive community.

A critical step is using **person-first language**. It changes phrases so that the person is emphasized, not the condition. For example, we can say "person with a disability" instead of "disabled person."⁵ Using this type of language contributes to an environment of dignity and respect and recognizes that the person's condition is only one part of their life and self.⁵



Use these terms instead: