

Opioid Use Disorder – Guide to Addressing Stigma

Prevention Works, Treatment is Effective, and People do Recover

Adapted from Arizona Rethink Rx Abuse Initiative



Stigma is an attribute, behavior, or condition that is socially discrediting

Why work to reduce stigma?

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's working definition of recovery states that recovery is "A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential." It goes on to list **health, home, purpose, and community** as essential dimensions of support for a life in recovery.

Stigma gets in the way of recovery. When a person with substance use disorder finally makes the difficult decision to reach out for help, he or she is often met with responses that are less than helpful, and this is often the result of stigma. Many examples of stigma are subtle. Stigma comes in the form of whispers, looks of pity or disdain, silence or rejection, statements made by strangers about "addicts", but taken together these paint a clear picture with a message that "good" individuals and families don't have this problem.

Examples of behaviors that may be driven by stigma are doctors who will not treat substance use disorder or consider medication assisted treatment, despite overwhelming evidence of its effectiveness. Some treatment providers, who don't understand that addiction is a chronic disease, discontinues services when the person in recovery relapses. Individuals and families often feel isolated from their communities and networks when they need help the most.

Hope, the most critical element of recovery, crumbles under the weight of stigma.

If we want to make an impact on the opioid epidemic in a meaningful way, as well as all other substance abuse problems.... we MUST address stigma.

How You Can Reduce Stigma

1. **Start by understanding your own potential biases**, your organization's biases, and ways that you may internally or externally shame individuals with substance use disorders or their families.
2. **Create a media campaign using messages of hope and faith.** The message that “prevention works, treatment is effective, and people do recover” is a good example of positive messaging. Use this messaging on created materials, on social media posts, in presentations, and in conversations.
3. **Change your words.** Words are important. An “addict” is a person with a substance use disorder. We do not call a person with cancer, a cancer. We can clearly see the negative impact this would have on morale and hope, and even on recovery-based behaviors (such as seeking treatment).
4. **Share stories of recovery.** They are powerful.
5. **Share information on ACEs** (Adverse Childhood Experiences), how common they are, and their relationship to addiction. As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk of negative health outcomes including substance misuse.
6. **Stick to the facts.** Facts are persuasive when challenging biases and fear-based stigma. It is hard to argue with cold, hard, facts. Science supports interventions such as motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapies, family based interventions, finding meaning, faith, and purpose, and medication assisted treatment. There is no evidence that supports confrontation or shaming as effective in helping people recover. Facts support messages of hope.
7. **Support access to treatment.** Know where to make referrals. Share resources. Give assistance. Sometimes the opportunity to encourage someone to find help is brief. Be ready.

Sources:

- Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice. *Trauma-Informed Approaches Need to be Part of a Comprehensive Strategy for Addressing the Opioid Epidemic*, June, 2017.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. *Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma*, November 2017.
- University of Washington Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute. *Evidence-Based Practices for Treating Substance Use Disorders: Matrix of Interventions*, August 2006.

Help is available at Capital Area Human Services. For more information, visit www.realhelpbr.com

