

# Stigma and People Who Use Drugs



Stigma is defined as the experience of being “deeply discredited” or marked due to one’s “undesired differentness.” To be stigmatized is to be held in contempt, shunned or rendered socially invisible because of a socially disapproved status.<sup>1</sup>

## Stigma and Drugs

There is an extensive body of literature documenting the stigma associated with alcohol and other drug problems. No physical or psychiatric condition is more associated with social disapproval and discrimination than substance dependence.<sup>2</sup>

For people who use drugs, or are recovering from problematic drug use, stigma can be a barrier to a wide range of opportunities and rights. People who are stigmatized for their drug involvement can endure social rejection, labeling, stereotyping and discrimination, even in the absence of any negative consequences associated with their drug use. This manifests in a variety of ways, including denial of employment or housing. People with substance misuse issues are less likely to be offered help than are people with a mental illness or physical disability.<sup>3</sup>

According to research, the majority of healthcare professionals hold negative, stereotyped views of people who use illicit drugs.<sup>4</sup> Stigma is a major factor preventing individuals from seeking and completing addiction treatment<sup>5</sup> and from utilizing harm reduction services such as syringe access programs. In a vicious cycle, the social exclusion created by stigma can increase the need for a variety of services.

Even among people who use drugs, stigma toward other people who use drugs can be common. People who use a socially acceptable, legal drug, such as alcohol, may have negative prejudices against people who use illegal drugs, such as marijuana. People who use illegal so-called ‘soft drugs’ such as marijuana may have negative prejudices against people who use

illegal powdered or ‘hard’ drugs, such as cocaine. And people who inhale or snort their drug of choice may have prejudice against people who inject a drug.

## What Can Be Done To Fight Stigma?

**Know the facts.** The majority of people who ever try *any drug do not use them problematically and do not develop a physical dependence.*<sup>6</sup> People who struggle with drug dependence, however, should be afforded the same dignity, respect and support as a person who struggles with any difficult issue.

The public’s perception of the “deadliest” and “most addictive” drugs are often not based on scientific evidence. You can help end stigma by learning the facts about drugs, drug use and evidence-based drug treatment and sharing the information with others.

**Language matters.** The way we talk about drugs and the people who use them can create or uphold stigma. Words like ‘crackhead,’ ‘junkie’ and ‘pillhead’ dehumanize a person who may be struggling with addiction. Focus on the whole person, not a behavior. Instead of ‘addict’, refer to a ‘person addicted to drugs.’

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