STIGMA
WHY WORDS MATTER

ABOUT STIGMA

Stigma is negative attitudes, beliefs or behaviors about or towards a group of people because of their situation in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment and stereotypes, which can isolate people who use substances.

Stigma Matters

People who use substances, especially those struggling with substance use disorder, face discrimination and barriers to getting help.

Stigma can:

- Lead a person to avoid getting help because they are afraid of judgment or getting in trouble with work, their loved ones or even the law.
- Cause a person to hide their drug use or use drugs alone.
- Affect a person's ability to find housing and jobs, which affects their health and quality of life.
- Contribute to people who use drugs receiving a lower quality of care from the healthcare system when they access services.

Change how you talk about drug use

The language you use has a direct and deep impact on people around you. You can reduce stigma by changing the words you use to talk about drug use. Using kind words can make it easier for someone to speak up, to feel understood or to receive help.

- Use person-first language; for example, say "person who uses drugs" instead of "drug user."
- Use neutral, medically accurate words when describing drug use.

Instead of	Use
Addict, junkie, user, drug abuser, recreational drug user	Person who uses drugs Person with a substance use disorder or addiction Person with lived experience Person who occasionally uses drugs Patient
Former drug addict, referring to a person as being "clean"	Person who has used drugs Person in recovery Person with lived experience
Substance/drug abuse	Substance/drug use (for illicit drugs) Substance/drug misuse or used other than prescribed (for prescription medications) Substance use disorder Drug dependence

For more information on why words matter and what terms should be avoided, please visit nida.nih.gov

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There are three types of stigma

- **Self** stigma happens when someone internalizes messages about people who use drugs and apply them to themselves.
- **Social** stigma is negative attitudes or behaviors towards people who use drugs or towards their friends and family.
- **Structural** stigma is policies in health and social services that increase stigma and barriers to getting help.

Help end stigma

Take these important steps to help reduce stigma:

Do not define any person by their drug use.

Be respectful, compassionate and caring to those who use drugs.

Educate your friends and family—share facts and challenge stereotypes.

Remember that addiction or substance use disorder is a treatable medical condition, not a choice, and is deserving of care just like any other medical condition.

Be aware of your attitudes and behaviors because they may be influenced by stereotypes, negative stories and images about people who use drugs.

Approaches providers can use to reduce stigma

- **Think of the patient as a person first.** Recognize the courage it took for them to seek help. Separate the person from the condition that brought them to you for care.
- **Know the facts.** Educate yourself and others about mental illness and addiction.
- **Be aware of your attitude and behavior.** We can change the way we think and act. See people as individuals, not as labels or stereotypes.
- **Focus on the positive.** Recognize and applaud people who are making positive changes despite their challenges. Remember reducing harm is a positive change.
- **Advocate for your patients and their families.** Treat people with dignity and respect.

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