



## **The Stigma of Substance Abuse**

What is the stigma related to substance abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction?

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Being the victim of stigma means that someone—or society in general—views you in a negative way because of a personal issue that is thought to be, or actually is a disadvantage. Another definition for stigma is a negative stereotype.

Many people who suffer from mental health conditions (like alcoholism and drug addiction) have to deal with negative attitudes and beliefs toward them all the time. People with substance use disorders are often blamed for their disease.

### **Pervasive Addiction Stigma Continues**

In a recent survey conducted by the RIWI Corporation, a U.S. research firm, 70% of Americans surveyed said they believe people who have drug problems are somewhat, mostly, or entirely responsible for their drug use.

So, even though medical science has proven that addiction is a

complex disease of the brain with complicated behavioral components, the general public continues to believe that drug and alcohol addiction are moral weaknesses that occur due to personal choices.

Most of us have made poor choices when we were young, and for people who are pre-disposed to addiction (either through genetics or an upbringing subjected to poor parenting), the decision to use drugs or alcohol at a young age often results in lifelong substance use disorders.

One of the most serious problems with the stigma surrounding drug and alcohol abuse is that it reinforces the need to get drunk, stoned, or high. People who have been treated badly after admitting to having an addiction problem and asking for help, typically prefer continued drug/alcohol use to seeking treatment in the future.

Substance abuse treatment does not always work the first time. For some people, it takes multiple attempts before sobriety can be achieved. For many who have entered treatment and failed, only to be judged and ridiculed for the failure, there is no desire to try again.

When we stigmatize and discriminate against people suffering from addiction, the rejection they feel drives them to continue using and

sometimes to even increase their drug and alcohol abuse in an attempt to deal with the pain.

As the Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Nora Volkow has said: "There must be wider recognition that susceptibility to the brain changes in addiction are substantially influenced by factors outside an individual's control, such as genetics or the environment in which one is born and raised, and that medical care is often necessary to facilitate recovery as well as avert the worst outcomes like overdose. When people with addiction are stigmatized and rejected, especially by those within healthcare, it only contributes to the vicious cycle that entrenches their disease."

### **Substance Abuse Stigma Harms Everyone**

If we are ever going to stop overdose deaths and protect the health and humanity of people who use drugs, we must put an end to the stigma attached to substance use disorders. Societal stigma is not only a barrier to making treatment programs available to those who need them most, it hampers the success of those in recovery.

Addiction stigma is a public health issue that contributes to higher death rates, increased incarcerations, and more mental health concerns.

The current opioid epidemic is a devastating example of how America is paying the price for decades of neglecting to address and reduce substance abuse stigma in our country.

### **Stopping Substance Abuse Stigma**

So how can we as individuals and as a society stop the stigma, stereotypes, and pessimism associated with drug and alcohol addiction? Educational programs and modeling of non-stigmatizing behavior and language are the beginning. We must stop using labels like "junkie," "crackhead," and "doper."

We must begin to offer compassionate support and display kindness to those who are struggling. We have to see people for who they are, not the drug they are addicted to. People with drug dependency must be treated with dignity and respect.

We also have to bring attention to the fact that with help, people do recover from drug and alcohol addiction. Although addiction is a chronic disease, it can be successfully managed for life, and there are thousands of individuals who can attest to that fact.

Instead of ridiculing and marginalizing those with substance use disorders, we must find ways to provide nonjudgmental and empathetic support.