



Stigma: Why Words Matter

What is stigma?

Stigma refers to negative attitudes and beliefs about a group of people and their circumstances in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgement, labels, isolation and stereotypes.

How does stigma affect people who use opioids?

Stigma can have a major impact on the quality of life of people who use opioids, people who are in recovery, and their friends and families.

Stigma creates barriers to accessing health and social services for substance use. Stigma can make people feel ashamed of their drug use which can prevent them from receiving help if they need or want it. Sadly, this often leads people to use drugs alone, which can in turn lead to overdosing and dying alone.

There are three types of stigma:

1. **Social stigma**—when you have negative attitudes or behaviours toward people who use drugs or their loved ones
2. **Structural stigma**—when health care providers or first responders ignore or do not take people with problematic substance use seriously
3. **Self-stigma**—when people apply to themselves the negative attitudes and beliefs that they have heard from others

Why words matter

Choosing our words carefully is an important first step toward reducing the cycle of stigma surrounding people who use drugs. What we say and how we say it can have a profound impact on those suffering around us. By using compassionate words in place of negative ones, you can make it easier for someone to speak up, to feel heard and understood, or to receive help.



A small change can help reduce the cycle of stigma

- ✓ Listen with compassion and without judgement, so that a person who uses drugs feels heard and understood
- ✓ Speak up when someone is being treated disrespectfully because of their substance use
- ✓ Words matter. Be kind with the words you use. Use people-first language:
 - Instead of “junkie” use “a person who uses drugs”
 - Instead of “addicts” use “people who have used drugs”
 - Instead of “drug abuse” use “problematic substance use”