

Harm Reduction

Reducing Stigma

Two key strategies for addressing harmful, high-risk substance use or substance-use disorder include reducing stigma and harm reduction. People will continue to experience harm from substance use if stigma prevents them from seeking help.

What is stigma?

- A complex social process of labeling, stereotyping, devaluing, and discrimination
- Occurs on multiple levels:
 - intrapersonal (self-stigma)
 - interpersonal (relations with others)
 - structural (discriminatory or exclusionary policies, laws, and systems)
- Includes negative attitudes and the negative behaviours that result from those attitudes

The impact of stigma

- Stigma impacts care, treatment, and recovery from a mental health condition or substance use disorder.
- People living with mental illness or substance use say the stigma they face is often worse than the illness itself.
- People are dying alone because of the shame and stigma of substance use.

What does stigma look like?

- Biases
- Distrust, anger, or fear
- Stereotyping
- Labeling
- Avoiding
- Discriminating
- Shaming

Myths that contribute to stigma

- People living with a mental health condition or substance use disorder are dangerous.
- People who use substances are lawbreakers.
- Addiction is just a lack of self-control.
- Addiction is a moral failure.
- Stigma does no harm.



Negative attitudes (prejudice) and negative behaviour (discrimination). These attitudes and judgments can affect how we think about, behave and provide care to clients.

Alberta Health Services



Stigma prevents people from seeking help.

The role of healthcare providers

Small things can make a big difference and help a person feel hopeful and supported.

- Listen.
- Show compassion.
- Be understanding.
- Be kind.



Approaches 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 attitudes and behaviours.** 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.
- **Advocate for patients and their families.** Treat people with dignity and respect.
- **Include everyone.** Ensure people with mental health and substance use problems are given equal opportunities to take part in their own care.

Choose your words carefully

One way to reduce stigma is to change the way we speak about people who use substances and substance use itself.

- **Use people-first language.** Refer to the person before describing their behaviour or condition.
- **Use language that reflects the medical nature of substance use disorders.** Avoid terms that suggest that addiction is a moral or personality failure, rather than a medical issue.
- **Use language that promotes recovery.** Be optimistic, supportive, and respectful of people's autonomy.
- **Avoid slang and idioms.** These terms can have negative meanings and be stigmatizing.

Instead of saying this:	Say this:	Rationale:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance/drug abuse • Problematic use • Misuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance/drug use • Substance/drug dependence • Substance/drug consumption • Substance use disorder (if diagnosed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not imply judgment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance/drug user • Addict • Junkie • Druggie • Abuser 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person who uses substances/drugs • Person with substance use disorder (if diagnosed) • Person with lived/living experience with substance use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to people as people first, not their use • Literal and neutral terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person who is clean • Person who has been clean • Former addict • Former abuser • Former junkie • Former druggie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person in recovery • Person who is sober • Person who is abstinent • Person who has lived experience with substance use • Person no longer using substances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literal and neutral terms that do not imply judgment (for example, if someone is "clean" when sober, they must be "dirty" when using)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relapse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not imply judgment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean drug screen • Dirty drug screen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative drug screen • Positive drug screen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medically accurate and neutral • Avoids slang

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More information

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