

Stigma Around Substance Use

Source: [Government of Canada](#)

Most of us know someone affected by substance use. Overdose-related deaths are affecting our friends, families and communities. It's a Canada-wide problem, but those affected continue to feel stigmatized.

Stigma (negative attitudes or beliefs) can have a major impact on the quality of life of people who use drugs, people who are in recovery and their friends and family.

It's important that as Canadians, we reduce stigma around drug use, so people can get help when they want and need it.

Stigma around substance use can prevent people from getting the help they need.

#endstigma

[Listen to In Plain Sight](#)

An audio series that explores the personal stories of people affected by the opioid crisis.

What is stigma?

Stigma is negative attitudes and beliefs about a group of people due to their circumstances in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judging, labeling, isolating and stereotyping.

Why does stigma matter?

Stigma matters because it can prevent people from getting help. Stigma creates barriers to accessing important health and social services.

What can I do?

How we talk about substance use matters. We can help reduce stigma by choosing our words carefully, and start talking about substance use. This change may seem small, but you never know who is listening and is impacted by your words. [Find out how you can help end stigma.](#)

Did you know? There are three main types of stigma

People who use drugs, and their families, most commonly face the following types of stigma:

Social stigma

Social stigma is:

- Negative attitudes towards people who use drugs or towards their friends and family members

- The use of negative labels in everyday conversation and in the media
- The use of negative images of people who use drugs or of their families
- Ignoring people with a substance use disorder or ignoring their families

Structural stigma

Structural stigma is:

- Social stigma from people who offer services to the public such as first responders, health care professionals and government representatives
- Ignoring people affected by substance use, or not taking their requests seriously
- Not connecting people with health or social services because of their substance use
- Designing health and social services in ways that enhance stigma, such as withholding health or other services until substance use is better managed

Self-stigma

Self-stigma is:

- When someone internalizes social and structural stigma by taking the negative messages people see about people who use drugs and apply them to themselves

What happens when someone faces stigma?

The structural stigma people face from health care and social services can create a major barrier to receiving the basic health and social services many of us take for granted. Stigma can affect a person's ability to find housing and jobs, which in turn affects their overall health and quality of life.

When people who use drugs face stigma in the health system, it **reduces the quality of care they receive**. It also makes the person less likely to follow through on a treatment program, out of fear they will face stigma again.

Stigma prevents people who use drugs from receiving the help they need. It can also prevent the people who use drugs and their loved ones from seeking the help they need.

When someone faces stigma, they can feel:

- Fear
- Anger
- Blame
- Shame
- Rejection
- Hopelessness
- Grief
- Distress
- Suicidal
- Isolated
- Devalued
- Lonely
- Loss of control

If someone has experienced social or structural stigma they are **less likely to reach out for help again.**

What you can do to help end stigma

Ending stigma can seem daunting but there are small steps you can take that can help. Change can start by simply being aware of the way we talk and act towards people who use drugs.

You can help end stigma by:

- Learning about substance use disorders and remembering that substance use disorders are a medical condition, deserving of care and treatment just like any other
- Being respectful, compassionate and caring to those who use drugs
- Not judging someone who uses drugs, as you may not know the whole story of their journey
- Being open minded and not letting opinions or assumptions colour the way we think of someone
- Changing the way we talk about drug use, and choosing our words carefully

Learn [how to talk to a friend or family member about drugs](#).

How we talk about drug use matters

As Canadians, we need to talk openly, respectfully and compassionately. We can also:

- Speak to the person first, before we talk about their substance use
- Avoid using slang and derogatory language such as "addict" and "junkie"
- Use language that expresses care and concern, rather than judgement
- Use language that acknowledges and promotes the fact that recovery from substance use disorders is possible
- Speak up when we hear or witness someone being treated, or spoken to or about, in a disrespectful manner

Find out more on [changing how we talk about substance use](#).