

# Stigma and Substance Use Overview

In the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, just over 30 million adults aged 18 or older perceived that they ever had a substance use problem.<sup>1</sup>

## People use substances for many reasons, including to:

- Manage pain
- Cope with mental health issues
- Increase energy
- Feel good
- Manage social situations
- And more

Substance use in various forms is fairly common. In the 2022 NSDUH, among people aged 12 or older, 48.7% (137.4 million people) used alcohol and 16.5% (46.6 million people) used an illicit drug in the past month.<sup>1</sup> Not everyone who uses substances develops a substance use disorder. In the same survey, 29.5 million people had an alcohol use disorder and 27.2 million people had a drug use disorder in the last year.<sup>1</sup> There is no single reason why people develop a SUD, but genetics, environment, and life circumstances all play a role.<sup>2</sup> People without a SUD may enter self-defined recovery through services and supports outside of traditional treatment systems.

What is important to remember is that recovery is possible for everyone. And recovery may look different for each individual. Recovery can be defined as a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in the 2022 NSDUH, 7 in 10 adults who ever had a substance use problem considered themselves to be recovering or in recovery.<sup>1</sup> Everyone deserves access to pragmatic, respectful, and individualized community supports. However, stigma can often get in the way of this support.<sup>4</sup>

 **Bonus:** Listen to [this 7-minute podcast](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on stigma.

## What is stigma?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines stigma as the labeling, stereotyping and devaluing of people based on certain social identities. This leads to discrimination and shame. Stigma related to substance use often stems from misconceptions, like viewing it as a moral or criminal issue. This blame on people makes it hard for others to empathize and understand the complexities behind substance use.

## What are the different types of stigma?

**Public or social stigma** are society's negative attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes held towards a group of people. This stigma often leads to social exclusion, isolation and discrimination against people who use substances.<sup>4,6</sup>

**Structural stigma** refers to policies or institutional actions that restrict — whether intentionally or not — the opportunities of targeted groups.<sup>6</sup>

**Structural stigma** shows up in public and private institutions, healthcare and treatment systems and the criminal justice system, among others. It often occurs because of public or social stigma.<sup>4</sup>

**Self-stigma** occurs when individuals internalize and accept negative stereotypes held by the public. This type of stigma leads to feelings of embarrassment and shame which lowers self-efficacy and help-seeking behaviors.<sup>2,3</sup> This happens because of past experiences of stigma and/or anticipated stigma.<sup>4,6</sup>

## What is stigma?

Stigma leads to the criminalization and isolation of people who use substances by reinforcing stereotypes and fostering fear and distrust. It makes it seem like substance use is a personal failure rather than a complex issue. It also hinders equitable access to health and social services and influences care quality through personal biases and policies. This impedes the promotion of evidence-based practices for addressing substance use and overdose.<sup>4,6</sup>

## Additional stigma to consider:

### Stigma of medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD)

Use of FDA-approved medications to treat MOUD are effective and improve treatment outcomes. However, some believe this method of recovery is “trading one drug for another” as the person would not be completely “abstinent” from all substances. This stigma has led to the underutilization of this effective treatment and put up walls in recovery communities.<sup>7</sup>

### Stigma within substance use

For example, there can be more stigma associated with certain methods and types of substances used.<sup>4</sup>

### Multiple stigmas

This type of stigma applies to an individual belonging to more than one stigmatized group, such as having a mental health condition or experiencing homelessness. The multiple stigmatized identities build on one another and lead to worse outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

## Steps to address stigma

It is important to fight the stigma around substance use to develop an understanding approach. By reducing stigma, an environment is created that encourages people to seek and receive needed services.

The following are research-supported ways to reduce stigma of substance use:<sup>4,5,6</sup>

### • Increase Education and Awareness

- Share resources and trainings around substance use, treatment, and recovery, especially to people who interact with those who use substances (e.g. health care providers, law enforcement, family members, etc.)
  - Resources:
    - [Case Studies on Stigma Reduction \(CDC PDF\)](#)
    - [Treatment of SUDs \(CDC Webpage\)](#)
    - [Addressing Stigma and Substance Use Disorders \(ATTC Free Training Modules\)](#)
- Use contact based strategies to increase positive experiences with people with lived experience
  - Share stories of people who have lived experience of substance use along with facts to promote understanding. Start at [YourLifelowa Recovery Stories](#).
  - Promote the peer workforce where individuals utilize their lived experience to engage and provide services to people who use substances
    - Resources:
      - [Peer Support Workers for those in Recovery](#)
      - [Iowa Peer Workforce Collaborative](#)
- Use and promote person-first language
  - Resource: [Words Matter PDF](#)

### • Promote Health Equity

- Engage people with lived experience and populations impacted by substance use related harms
  - Resources:
    - [Health Equity and Drug Overdose \(CDC\)](#)
    - [Participatory Methods Matrix](#)
    - [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)
- Partner across sectors and communities to improve social determinants of health, the conditions in which people live, work, learn, and play.

### • Support Policy Changes

- Educate policy makers of systems and organizations to ensure equitable access to services like housing, treatment, and naloxone
  - Resource: [Partnership to End Addiction Advocacy Toolkit 2020](#)

While good intentioned, sometimes “anti-stigma” efforts can actually end up furthering stigma. Make sure to consult with evidence-based practices and people with lived experience continuously to avoid causing any harm.

## References

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