

Understanding Stigma



Interestingly... the word “stigma” originates from the word used for a sharp stick (or *stig*) that early Greeks used to tattoo slaves, criminals and undesirables. If you do a quick search online you will find many definitions of stigma and most point to a mark of shame, disgrace, or inferiority.

But it’s not that simple ... and understanding stigma (and then countering it) also requires a social justice lens and a hard look at what both individuals and society does to create and perpetuate inequities and discrimination. Stigma takes many forms:

Structural stigma - Organizations often have formal or informal practices in place that exclude or discriminate against people. Practices that deny or put up barriers to accessing medical care for someone who uses substances or has a blood-borne infection, laws developed or enforced selectively targeting specific groups of people, media use of stereotypical images and disrespectful language are just a few examples.

Public stigma - Negative and harmful views held by members of the public that often show up in daily conversation with friends, family and these days are often elevated through social media.

Self-stigma – This occurs when individuals internalize negative public perceptions and see themselves as inferior, less deserving, unworthy. Self-stigma often results in hopelessness, shame and isolation.

The Power of Language

The words we use have a powerful impact on the people who access our services. Non-stigmatizing language creates inclusivity and safety for people accessing care and can influence the attitudes and beliefs of others. Some tips to help you use non-stigmatizing language:

Use people first language - i.e. person who uses drugs instead of drug user.

Use medical terminology - i.e. substance use disorder instead of addict.

Use language that promotes autonomy - i.e. opted not to instead of unmotivated.

Avoid slang or idioms - words like junkie, clean or dirty not only sound unprofessional they also convey judgement.

Want to know more?

[Language matters - BCCDC](#) - focuses on language for talking about substance use issues.

[Language Matters - Canadian Public Health Association](#) - focuses on language for talking about sexuality, sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBIs), and substance use. Lots of examples and tips!



We want to hear from you!



Tell us your ideas for addressing stigma in your workplace, your community and your personal life. What have you done that has been successful? What ideas do you have? Email us at harmreduction.coordinator@interiorhealth.ca

What's New?

Report on the State of Public Health in Canada (2019) focuses on stigma

Every year the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada writes a report on the state of public health in our country. The intention of the report is to raise the profile of issues affecting health, stimulate dialogue and action. This years report focuses on stigma and health. A snap shot of her introduction to the report is below; the [full report](#) is well worth a read!

Stigma affects us all. We are all vulnerable to the slow and insidious practice of dehumanizing others... and we are all responsible for recognizing and stopping it...

These many forms of stigma that intersect in complex ways, are very much present in our health system, driving those most in need from getting effective care and accessing services. It means that we, as health system leaders and practitioners, are contributing to negative health outcomes.

Dr. Theresa Tam
Chief Public Health Officer of Canada

Resources

Stigma Assessment Tools

The Canadian Public Health Association has developed two stigma assessment tools focusing on STBBIs. One is for individuals and the other for organizations.



Check them out:

[Self-assessment tool for STBBIs and stigma](#)

[Organizational assessment tool for STBBIs and stigma](#)

Education

LEARN

Mothingering and Opioids: Addressing Stigma and Acting Collaboratively

Did you miss the webinar on Nov 28, 2019? Have no fear! There is a [live recording](#) online as well as the [PowerPoint](#) and [Toolkit](#)!

The webinar provides an overview of a new toolkit that invites people working in the substance use, child welfare, and related systems, to think about how we can continue to improve our work in partnership with women who engage with these services.

Understanding Stigma – Canadian Association for Mental Health (CAMH)

CAMH offers a free six hour [online course](#) for health care practitioners and front-line clinicians. The course is designed to help health care providers and frontline clinicians develop strategies to improve patient–provider interactions and overall care for people with mental illness including addiction.



Dosed - Kelowna premiere - One Night Only February 7, 2020

An evening dedicated to psychedelics, mental health, addiction, compassion, education, and solutions. The [DOSED screening](#) will be followed by a Q&A led by members of the film and The Okanagan Psychedelic Society.

Questions, comments, have a great harm reduction initiative you want to share? Get in touch! We would LOVE to hear from you. Email us! harmreduction.coordinator@interiorhealth.ca