What is Stigma?

A system of attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and structures held by a person or persons, that result in prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping for individuals in a marginalized group.

Stigma marks an individual or a group with disgrace, dishonor, and discredit.

(Ending discrimination against people with mental and substance use disorders: the evidence for stigma)

Studies show that substance use disorder is one of the MOST stigmatized conditions and individuals face high levels of social disapproval and discrimination.

Stigma is present at multiple levels

Individuals who experience substance use are more likely to:

SELF

Have negative self-perceptions and identity formation, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy

Have feelings of shame and fear around social and legal consequences

SYSTEMIC

Have reduced access to health care, housing, and employment

SOCIAL

Receive suboptimal treatment and have less time spent with them from medical providers

To not seek treatment, drop out of treatment early, and report feelings of fear around disclosing their condition

Face negative implicit bias and stereotyping from society

They may be viewed as immoral and lacking self-control

Be viewed as manipulative, violent, unpredictable and poorly motivated by medical providers

(Livingston, Milne, Fang, & Amari, 2012)

Northwest Passage. (2014). The vicious cycle of stigma.
Reduce Stigma through Language

1. Change the language around substance use
   - Use person centered speech
   - “Substance abuser” or “addict” becomes “person with a substance use disorder”
   - The word “abuser” has strong negative connotations and associations with punishment
   - Change in terminology reflects the medical condition rather than personal failing and/or choice

2. Increased exposure to individuals in recovery - “putting a face on addiction”
   - Demonstrates negative attributes are not specific to or representative of people who use substances
   - Increases comfort between different groups
   - Decreases feelings of “us” vs. “them”
   - Humanizes those with substance use problems

3. Increase education around substance use, treatment, and recovery
   - Dispels myths, provides factual information and resources

4. Decrease punitive measures while increasing support and treatment resources
   - Individuals are more likely to disclose substance use to medical providers, and receive care, if they do not fear legal recourse

Additional Resources

Faces and Voices of Recovery
http://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/

The Recovery Research Institute
https://www.recoveryanswers.org/

SAMHSA
https://www.samhsa.gov/

TN Treatment & Recovery Services
https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/topic/treatment-recovery

References

http://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/DPA_Fact_Sheet_Stigma_and_People_Who_Use_Drugs.pdf


Kehoe, L. G. Addiction Epidemiology, Language and Stigma. [PowerPoint slides]
