

What is Stigma?

And Why is it Harmful?



Stigma means a mark or sign of shame, disgrace, or disapproval; of being shunned or rejected by others. It emerges when people feel uneasy or embarrassed to talk about behavior they perceive as different.

3 Types of Stigma

PUBLIC | Encompasses the attitudes and feelings expressed by many in the general public or their family members toward persons living with Opioid Use Disorder (OUD), HIV and viral Hepatitis, Substance Use Disorder (SUD), or Mental Illness (MI).

INSTITUTIONAL | When negative attitudes and behaviors about physical and mental illnesses are incorporated into the policies, practices, and cultures of health care organizations.

SELF-STIGMA | When individuals internalize the disrespectful images that society, a community, or a peer group perpetuates, which may lead individuals to refrain from seeking treatment.

Stigma remains the biggest barrier to treatment faced by patients with misunderstood chronic illnesses. The terminology used to describe chronic conditions has contributed to the stigma. By choosing language that is not stigmatizing, we can begin to dismantle the negative stereotype associated with these conditions.

Choosing the words we use more carefully is one way we can all make a difference and help decrease the stigma. It will allow patients to more easily regain their self-esteem, allow doctors to treat without disapproval from their peers, allow insurers to cover treatment, and help the public understand these are medical conditions as real as any other.

Harmful Effects of Stigma

- Reluctance to seek help or treatment
- Lack of understanding by family, friends, co-workers, or others
- Fewer opportunities for work, school, social activities, or trouble finding housing
- Bullying, physical violence, or harassment
- Health insurance that doesn't adequately cover treatment
- The belief that you'll never succeed at certain challenges or you can't improve your situation

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