Why Mindset Matters

The load of mental health and substance use disorders is already heavy; a compassionate mindset can help lighten the load.



What helps:

- Use person-first **thinking**.
  - Focus on the person, not the label.
  - Be curious, not judgmental.
- Normalize help-seeking as a strength.
- Frame recovery as skill-building.
- Look for what you have in common.
- Share facts, not gossip.
- Cultivate community responsibility over individual blame.

What hurts:

- Not seeing addiction as a disease.
  - Addiction changes the structure and function of the brain, impairing the reward system and decision making.
  - It is not a choice, character flaw, or moral failing; these cause shame.
- Waiting for folks to hit "rock bottom."
  - Addiction rewires our survival instincts; stop thinking there is a rock bottom.
- Not supporting local prevention efforts.
  - Youth with a family history of addiction are 40-60% more likely to develop the disease during their lifetime.
  - 90% of people with addiction began using substances before the age of 18.

Help our community reduce the negative impact of stigma by shifting our *mindset*, *beliefs*, and *attitudes* to ones that support and uplift those that are in need.

Update Our Mindset, Beliefs, & Attitudes

Our mindset, beliefs, and attitudes keep stigma alive while hurting others. The way we think about mental health and substance use affects how we treat people. Shame, fear, and blame make it harder for people to ask for help, which can keep them from getting better.

What does **stigma** look like?

- **Labeling:** Calling someone "an addict" instead of a person.
- **Blaming:** Saying "They chose this" or "They're weak."
- **Thinking it's permanent:** "They'll never get better."
- **Avoiding people:** Staying away from a neighbor or coworker who shares their struggles.

Each of these makes people feel alone and often stops them from getting help; there are several small things we can do that will make a BIG difference.

Try these easy swaps to change your thinking by reframing the words you use in your thoughts.

- Use Person-first ***thinking.***
  - Instead of: "She's a drug abuser."
  - ***Think:*** "She's a person with a substance use disorder."
- See a person's behavior and **think** of it as a sign, not a shame.
  - Instead of: "He relapsed because he gave up."
  - ***Think:*** "A relapse can mean there is a need for a change in treatment or supports."
- **Think** of recovery as a process.
  - Instead of: "If they fail once, they're done."
  - ***Think:*** "Each try teaches something useful."

Resist the urge to blame by learning about the root causes of mental health and substance use disorders. They are complex experiences, and they are generally caused by several intersecting factors like genetics, brain chemistry, life events, age of first use, access, environment, adverse childhood experiences, stress, and trauma. Some people simply have more risk factors.

As you change your thinking, what you say and do may change, too. Here are some simple things you can practice that will make a difference today:

- Ask kindly: "Can you tell me more about what's happening?" or "What would help you right now?"
- Offer resources and support: go with them to an appointment and share service options.
- Share uplifting stories: Give hope freely.
- Update others' ways of thinking gently: If someone uses a hurtful word, rephrase it once and move on. Focus on respect, not shame.

Small language and behavior changes matter. Be curious, not judgmental. Support, respect, and connection help people get better.

Center for Community Engagement at Chestnut Health Systems

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