Center for Community Engagement at Chestnut Health Systems

Stigma & Addiction

Quick Reference Guide

Addiction is a disease that affects more than 43 million Americans.

An estimated 20 million Americans are in active addiction. Another estimated 23 million are living in recovery. Combined – 43 million Americans are affected. Of the 22 million people who need treatment, on 1 in 10 receive it. Like other diseases, addiction should be treated medically. Addiction (or substance use disorder) is not a choice, and it's not due to a lack of willpower. Addiction is a CHRONIC BRAIN DISEASE—that can be compared to other chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. In the case of addiction, the brain is the organ which is impacted.

When you have the disease of addiction, it's a driving force as deep and vital to your survival as eating. The disease takes over parts of the brain, including the motivation and reward systems. It also affects the part of the brain that allows you to reason and weigh the consequences of your choices. It changes the wiring in the brain and tells the person that their very survival is dependent upon using again.[1]

But how is the disease of addiction impacted by stigma?

One of the most common reasons why addiction is stigmatized is because most people don't understand it.

It is human nature to fear (and stigmatize) what we don't understand, and when it comes to addiction, most people don't understand it as the disease it is. In fact, more than 76% of Americans believe that substance addiction is nothing more than a moral problem.[1]

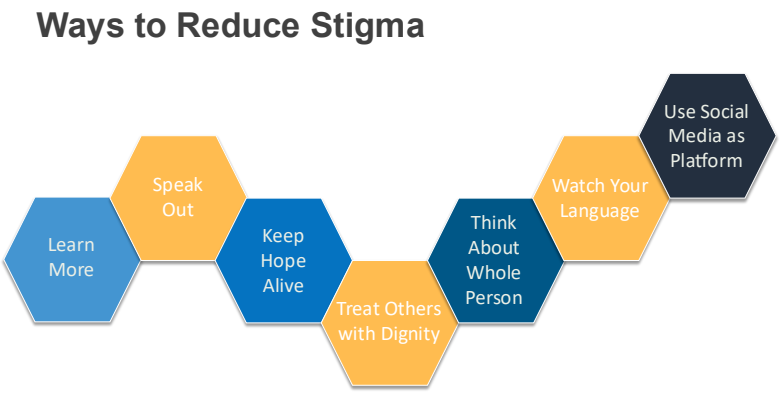
Like many other chronic diseases, we know that the sooner someone seeks help, the better the outcome, yet when people see addiction as a moral failing, a choice, or a lack of willpower, these beliefs and words spread stigma and discourage people from wanting to ***help*** those with an addiction.

Besides discouraging people from helping those with an addiction, stigma also causes individuals with an addiction to become so embarrassed or ashamed that they hide their symptoms—and avoid seeking the very help, treatment, services, and supports they need and deserve.[1]



Being the target of stigma means that others have labeled or hold negative opinions of a particular person or group of people. In general, people can be stigmatized for their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their income, their location, the type of job they have, if they have a mental illness or an addiction, and the list goes on. It is important to look at the labels you use to describe others. Awareness is an important first step in seeing the ways that you speak stigma.

How Can We Reduce Stigma?



First, you can always learn more. There are other videos and resources in this toolkit to help you learn more about addiction, harm reduction, and stigma.

Speak out. You can challenge inaccuracies that you hear in conversation or online and you can educate others and guide them to reputable sources for more information. You can **keep hope alive**, **treat others with dignity**, and **think about others as a whole person**. People are so much more than a label. Simply learning to **watch your language** and the words you use to talk to and about people with a substance use disorder can make a huge difference. Lastly, you can **use social media as a positive platform** where you can share articles, events, and policy updates with your network to educate others including your family, your friends, your community, and beyond.[1]

All change begins with the first step. So, if you can do only 1 thing, know that your words matter.

Begin to use the word Addiction or Substance Use Disorder. Avoid using negative and stigmatizing words like 'addict', 'user', 'abuser', 'junkie' - all of which sensationalize the disease. Choose phrasing like, she has an addiction, people with a heroin addiction, or he was using drugs.

If you can do only one thing, know that your words matter.

Paying attention to your choice of words can make a difference between someone seeking help not.[1]

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