

Understanding THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Stigma Fact Sheet

stig·ma, noun

mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.
synonyms: shame, disgrace, dishonor, humiliation, (bad) reputation

Many people are faced with effects of STIGMA. Some people who have had money problems, spent time in jail, or do not have a college education face stigma. Among the most common people facing STIGMA, are those who suffer from mental health issues and those struggling with addiction.

Because of this stigma, the National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates fewer than 12% of Americans suffering from substance use disorders receive treatment. For many, the stigma associated with opioid and heroin addiction gets in the way of treatment.

In *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*, Dr. Blondell says,

“...when you talk about addiction sometimes that triggers responses based on prejudice and ignorance. So there are some who might think that it’s not a medical problem at all, it’s just a moral character defect.”

But in fact, NIDA science shows that addiction is a disease, just like cancer and asthma are diseases. It’s not just that the person chooses to take drugs. In fact, an addicted person no longer chooses to take drugs—instead, their brains have been altered by drugs to the point where the person's free will has been “hijacked,” and their desire to seek and use drugs is beyond their control.

For people who use drugs, or are recovering from addiction, stigma can be a barrier to many opportunities and rights. People who are stigmatized for their drug involvement have had to deal with rejection from friends and family, labeling or name calling, stereotyping and discrimination.

Stigma is a major factor preventing individuals from seeking and completing addiction treatment. People who struggle with drug addiction should be allowed the same dignity, respect and support as a person who struggles with any difficult issue.

Source: *Understanding the Opioid Epidemic*; National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Drug Policy Alliance.

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