

Stigma and opioids - Opioid addiction, part 12



There is a **stigma** associated with substance use disorder. When someone is stigmatized, other people view the person as the problem rather than viewing the condition as the problem. Stigma brings feelings of shame and isolation. The stigma and feelings of shame around substance abuse can make it even harder to ask for help.

Opioid use disorder is a medical illness. Many view it as a moral weakness or a willful choice. Calling someone a *substance abuser* instead of a *person with a substance use disorder* places blame on the user. Society may judge the user as weak or immoral instead of someone who is sick.

Negative attitudes can affect the quality of health care. Clinicians who treat patients with substance use disorders may not always focus enough on other mental and physical health conditions.



Fear of Punishment

The criminal justice system often fails to treat opioid use disorder as a medical condition. Concerns about social, financial, and legal penalties may prevent someone with a substance use disorder from telling their family or getting help.



Medication as Treatment

There is stigma related to treatment of opioid use disorder with medications. This may limit the quality of care for the patient. Some people believe that the use of medications in the treatment of substance use disorders is just replacing one addiction for another.

When someone is treated for an opioid addiction, the dosage of treatment medication does not result in a high. It helps to reduce opioid cravings and withdrawal symptoms. Treatment medications help the person's brain to heal while they work towards substance abuse recovery.

The shame and stigma around substance abuse would be much less if it was understood as a medical condition that impacts the brain.

People and their family members who are dealing with mental or substance use disorders, or both, can call the National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357. This is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service. It is available in English and Spanish. The National Helpline provides referrals to local treatment centers, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free brochures and other information.



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