



# The Realities of **Stigma**

Stigmas about addiction can take the form of negative language, behaviors and attitudes aimed at people suffering from addiction. They're usually based on misinformation, misunderstanding and fear. Stigma does not encourage or support people with addictions to seek treatment and recovery. In fact, it does the opposite. Stigma actually promotes ongoing, untreated addiction—and all of the harm that addiction brings to our families, our friends, and our communities.

*“When I overdosed, my name was all over the local papers. People said I chose to be an addict, and **called me a horrible mother**. Despite these barriers, I got treatment, and I’ve been in recovery now for 4 years. I am back with my family.”*

- Married mother now in recovery

*“When your child has a chronic illness, you might get a casserole from friends or offers to help with day-to-day activities. But not when it’s an addiction. When my child was in and out of treatment, **I’d do my shopping in other towns so I wouldn’t run into anyone** I knew because I felt people were judging me.”*

- Parent of teenager suffering from addiction

**No one chooses to become addicted to opioids.** Often it starts with a doctor’s prescription and quickly gets out of control. People might do bad, even illegal things because of their addiction, but it doesn’t mean they’re bad people.

**Addiction to opioids is a chronic disease**, much like diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. It often demands multiple attempts at treatment. But it *can* and does work. **Recovery is possible.**

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“I would never admit to a coworker that I had a heroin addiction. In casual conversations, **they’d always throw around labels like ‘addict,’ and ‘lowlife.’** Or they’d say, ‘once a junkie, always a junkie.’ They had no idea how much that hurt me. For a long time, it kept me from getting treatment or emotional support from my friends and co-workers.”

- Person in recovery  
and now back at work

**Opioid addiction is a public health epidemic.** Chances are very good that you know someone who’s struggling with addiction. Negative language and behaviors directed at people with addictions – at home, at work or in the community – force many to hide their “secret” and avoid seeking treatment. Personal or public stigmas ultimately create more harm than good.

“When I went to the doctor to get an insulin shot, **they treated me like dirt** once they knew I also struggled with addiction. Even though I was in recovery, and getting medication-assisted treatment, they left me waiting on a gurney in a hallway for hours.”

- Woman receiving medication-assisted treatment

**Even among some health care providers there is a misunderstanding about how stigma affects people with addictions,** in some cases blocking their ability to seek treatment and maintain their recovery. Even within the addiction community, some people have a stigma against those receiving medication-assisted treatment (MAT).

**When we  
eliminate stigma,  
we can *save lives.***



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