



Two-thirds of teens who report abuse of prescription medicine are getting them from family, friends, and acquaintances. Make sure the teens in your life don't have access to your medicine!

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## The Stigma of Substance Abuse

What is the stigma related to substance abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction?

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. Being the victim of stigma means that someone—or society in general—views you in a negative way because of a personal issue that is thought to be, or actually is a disadvantage. Another definition for stigma is a negative stereotype.

Many people who suffer from mental health conditions (like alcoholism and drug addiction) have to deal with negative attitudes and beliefs toward them all the time. People with substance use disorders are often blamed for their disease.

## Pervasive Addiction Stigma Continues

In a recent survey conducted by the RIWI Corporation, a U.S. research firm, 70% of Americans surveyed said they believe people who have drug problems are somewhat, mostly, or entirely responsible for their drug use.

So, even though medical science has proven that addiction is a

complex disease of the brain with complicated behavioral components, the general public continues to believe that drug and alcohol addiction are moral weaknesses that occur due to personal choices.

Most of us have made poor choices when we were young, and for people who are pre-disposed to addiction (either through genetics or an upbringing subjected to poor parenting), the decision to use drugs or alcohol at a young age often results in lifelong substance use disorders.

One of the most serious problems with the stigma surrounding drug and alcohol abuse is that it reinforces the need to get drunk, stoned, or high. People who have been treated badly after admitting to having an addiction problem and asking for help, typically prefer continued drug/alcohol use to seeking treatment in the future.

Substance abuse treatment does not always work the first time. For some people, it takes multiple attempts before sobriety can be achieved. For many who have entered treatment and failed, only to be judged and ridiculed for the failure, there is no desire to try again.

When we stigmatize and discriminate against people suffering from addiction, the rejection they feel drives them to continue using and

sometimes to even increase their drug and alcohol abuse in an attempt to deal with the pain.

As the Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Nora Volkow has said: "There must be wider recognition that susceptibility to the brain changes in addiction are substantially influenced by factors outside an individual's control, such as genetics or the environment in which one is born and raised, and that medical care is often necessary to facilitate recovery as well as avert the worst outcomes like overdose. When people with addiction are stigmatized and rejected, especially by those within healthcare, it only contributes to the vicious cycle that entrenches their disease."

### **Substance Abuse Stigma Harms Everyone**

If we are ever going to stop overdose deaths and protect the health and humanity of people who use drugs, we must put an end to the stigma attached to substance use disorders. Societal stigma is not only a barrier to making treatment programs available to those who need them most, it hampers the success of those in recovery.

Addiction stigma is a public health issue that contributes to higher death rates, increased incarcerations, and more mental health concerns.

The current opioid epidemic is a devastating example of how America is paying the price for decades of neglecting to address and reduce substance abuse stigma in our country.

### **Stopping Substance Abuse Stigma**

So how can we as individuals and as a society stop the stigma, stereotypes, and pessimism associated with drug and alcohol addiction? Educational programs and modeling of non-stigmatizing behavior and language are the beginning. We must stop using labels like "junkie," "crackhead," and "doper."

We must begin to offer compassionate support and display kindness to those who are struggling. We have to see people for who they are, not the drug they are addicted to. People with drug dependency must be treated with dignity and respect.

We also have to bring attention to the fact that with help, people do recover from drug and alcohol addiction. Although addiction is a chronic disease, it can be successfully managed for life, and there are thousands of individuals who can attest to that fact.

Instead of ridiculing and marginalizing those with substance use disorders, we must find ways to provide nonjudgmental and empathetic support.



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# Supervisor Newsletter

## Mixing Drugs and Alcohol

Drinking alcoholic beverages along with the use of prescription drugs and/or illegal drugs can be a deadly combination.

Individuals who suffer from a dependency on multiple substances have a significant risk of overdose. This is known as polysubstance use disorder. Half of all overdose deaths involve multiple substances.

Employees with polysubstance addictions is a growing problem in the workplace. In addition to increased risk of accidents, polysubstance users experience health complications that increase insurance rates for employers.

Prolonged use of medications mixed with alcohol and/or street drugs can result in heart disease, dangerously high or low blood pressure, liver and kidney disease, and stroke.

Additionally, polysubstance users who are in active addiction are not concerned about their safety or the safety of their coworkers. They are so focused on getting the drugs they need, they are not able to understand or care

about the risks of using multiple drugs and the outcomes.

## Why do People Combine Drugs?

Some people combine substances to enhance their effect. For example, people who drink alcohol to relax might also use opioids because they are seeking a deeper feeling of relaxation.

Others add the use of one drug to counteract another. Methamphetamine users will often take benzodiazepines to come down off a meth high. Even over-the-counter drugs like sleep aids, antihistamines, pseudoephedrine, expectorants, and sildenafil, along with anabolic steroids are often mixed with alcohol and illegal drugs to increase the effects.

Some drug users don't realize that they could be unintentionally mixing dangerous substances when they choose to purchase and use illicit drugs. For example, powdered fentanyl looks exactly like many other street drugs. It is often mixed with drugs like cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. Drug users are sometimes surprised when they test positive for fentanyl, not having known that the drugs they purchased from a dealer were cut with this dangerous substance.

## **Polysubstance Use Treatment**

Helping people with polysubstance use disorder can be challenging. Symptoms and withdrawal for each drug being used can be substantially different, making detoxification difficult. This situation is often made worse by co-occurring mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

When employees turn to the dangerous behavior of combining drug and alcohol use to self-medicate, and to avoid the challenges and feelings of stress in their work and personal lives, it creates numerous problems for supervisors and employers.

It is important for supervisors to refer individuals with polysubstance use disorder to professionals who are trained in dealing with the disease. Treatment professionals can help patients find healthy ways to deal with feelings of pain and discomfort and return to work and a normal life.

For employees who are in recovery from substance abuse, they must understand that they are especially at risk for polysubstance use disorder. The use of so-called "safe" drugs like alcohol or marijuana can result in relapse and a return to the original drug of choice. Sustained recovery requires abstinence from all substances to stay clean and sober.

Supervisors must understand however, that some employees may need

long-term care to deal with their polysubstance use problem. Treatment might include psychiatric or behavior therapy, support groups, and recovery meetings. It will be important for the employer to decide up front whether or not to stand by the employee and support him or her through treatment, or to let that person go. Supervisors can help workers to remain accountable and on the road to recovery, but this can sometimes be a time-consuming and costly effort.

## **Treatment Saves Lives and Money**

Drug use, and especially polysubstance use, costs American companies more than \$80 billion in lost profits annually. But treatment for addiction has been proven to be successful in recovering valued workers and increasing their mental and social functioning as well as decreasing workplace conflict, absenteeism rates, and productivity problems.

According to Harvard Health Publishing, an investment in employee treatment yields high returns with an estimated gain of 23% among employees with an income of \$45,000 per year or an estimated gain of 64% for employees earning \$60,000 per year.

Focusing less on punishing employee substance abuse and more on finding ways to provide treatment, education, and support helps to humanize the workplace and reduce the painful suffering and often deadly consequences of addiction.