

Breaking down stigma and substance misuse

A little understanding can go a long way toward making your workplace a safe space.



Stop for a second. Think about the last person you spoke to—and about all the ways you might differ from one another: race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, age, physical ability. Or maybe you have different economic circumstances, or one of you is experiencing mental illness or a substance use issue.

Now think about all the negative, unfair beliefs that people might have about those differences. That's stigma. Many people have to deal with it every day.

These negative views can be born out of misunderstanding, misinformation, and sometimes even fear. They create an “us and them” divide whereby people who are seen as being different from what society considers normal are negatively stereotyped and discriminated against. Stigma is a significant psychological health hazard for affected individuals. In extreme cases, stigmatized people or groups may also experience threats to their physical safety.

Impacts on workers and the workplace

At work, the discrimination resulting from stigma can take many forms. Perhaps a stigmatized worker's opinion is disregarded at a meeting, or they are harassed by colleagues. Whatever the case may be, the result is harm to the affected worker and the workplace.

Stigma that has become commonplace creates a hostile work environment with less diversity, less trust, and lower morale—all of which can be a drag on productivity. The consequences for affected individuals are even more serious: they may experience an array of negative mental and physical health impacts, including feelings of shame, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the escalation of mental illness in vulnerable individuals, the onset of (or increase in) substance misuse, and self-inflicted harm.

Stigma and substance misuse

Substance misuse is a particular concern for the industries that IHSA serves. Among a variety of factors, the high-risk nature of jobs such as those in the trades means that workers are more likely to use substances such as opioids for pain management. Indeed, these drugs are often prescribed legitimately and legally to injured workers who use them responsibly. Stigmatized workers, however, may misuse opioids to numb mental pain, whether that pain is caused by workplace issues, problems at home, or societal prejudice.

Because of a lack of understanding about mental health and substance use issues in general, affected workers are then stigmatized a second time: they're often seen as reckless, dangerous, or a “lost cause.”

According to a 2019 report by Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, nearly half of Canadians who were in recovery from substance misuse reported experiencing stigma or discrimination during their active addiction. That stigmatization, associated with both mental illness and substance misuse, means those who are suffering are less likely to seek help.

Awareness and empathy

Addressing stigma at the workplace is therefore about creating a safe space where individuals can feel comfortable asking for help without fear of being judged. Employers and supervisors can start this work by:

- **Educating workers** about the realities of substance misuse, which is recognized as a medical condition requiring proper treatment and supports, and combatting misconceptions about addiction being a “choice” or the result of personal weakness.
- **Providing regular training** on topics such as recognizing the signs of substance misuse, how to respond, and how to seek help. Training should address both conscious and unconscious bias, and promote empathy and understanding toward people who use substances.
- **Encouraging open dialogue** among workers about their experiences. This can promote empathy and understanding. It can also help employers to identify those who may be struggling in order to provide them with necessary support.
- **Offering resources and accommodations**, which could include flexible working arrangements, assistance programs, and access to counselling services.

Beyond that, everyone can help break down stigma surrounding substance misuse by using language that shows concern and care instead of judgment, and by considering the STOP criteria to recognize attitudes and actions that stigmatize substance misuse. Ask yourself if what you hear or feel:

- **Stereotypes** people with substance misuse issues by assuming they’re all alike.
- **Trivializes** or belittles people who suffer from substance misuse and/or the condition itself.
- **Offends** people with substance misuse concerns by insulting them.
- **Patronizes** people who misuse substances by treating them as if they’re not as good as others.

There’s no guaranteed way to fix the problem of substance misuse in Ontario. But challenging the stigma associated with it is an easy way for both individuals and workplaces to be part of the solution right now. Simply by taking steps to be more understanding and empathetic—to put yourself in another person’s shoes—you can begin the work of addressing all types of stigma and discrimination to create a more inclusive, supportive environment for everyone.



More ways to address stigma and substance misuse



LEARN how to talk about mental health at your workplace: ihsa.ca/products/w131



DELIVER a safety talk on challenging stigma and preventing mental harm: ihsa.ca/safetytalks



DOWNLOAD IHSA’s guide, *Opioid use and workplace implications for trade sectors* (W132), to help you assess and address opioid-related hazards and harms: ihsa.ca/products/w132



LISTEN to episode 35 of the *IHSA Safety Podcast*, focusing on stigma and its harms: ihsasafetypodcast.ca