

Stigma around opioid use

Stigma is a set of negative beliefs and prejudices about a person or group of people. Often based on myths and outdated social norms, it can lead to discrimination.

Workplaces must take all reasonable steps to reduce stigma around opioid use among their workforce.

Explain dangers

Experiencing stigma and discrimination based on their opioid use or a substance use disorder can have several negative impacts on a worker's overall well-being. They could develop new substance use problems, or their existing issues could be exacerbated. They might use opioids alone or hide their drug use and become discouraged from getting help due to fear of judgement or legal trouble.

People who use opioids can receive a lower quality of care from the health care system and be denied housing or employment due to stigma.

Identify controls

Workers are often reluctant to reach out for support with problematic substance use in the workplace due to stigma. Due to this fact, workplaces should explore how stigma is contributing to this reluctance.

- Understand that stigma can come in various forms, including self-imposed stigma, social stigma, and structural stigma.
- Be aware of the language you use at work.
- Avoid using words that can be hurtful, such as junkie, pill-popper, or druggie.
- Learn more about mental illness and addiction through trusted sources like the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) or Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).
- Consider your own feelings about mental illnesses or addictions. Do you have biases or judge people?

- Think about and discuss what you see in the media. People with mental illness or addictions are not always depicted fairly and accurately.
- Use the **STOP criteria** to recognize attitudes and actions that stigmatize problematic opioid use and opioid use disorder. This involves asking yourself, does what you hear:

S—Stereotype people who use opioids (i.e., assume they are all alike, rather than individuals)?

T—Trivialize or belittle people who use opioids and/or opioid use itself?

O—Offend people who use opioids by insulting them?

P—Patronize people who use opioids by treating them as if they are not as good as other people?

Demonstrate

- Challenge your own biases to be better able to help workers challenge theirs and avoid using language that stigmatizes people who use opioids or other drugs.
- Understanding opioid use disorder, addiction, or other problematic substance use requires awareness. Review the stigma-related resources in IHSA's employer guide [Opioid use and workplace implications for trade sectors](#) (W132).
- Ensure everyone in your organization is aware of stigma-related resources from IHSA, such as our facilitators guide [How to talk about mental health at your workplace](#) (W131), [workplace mental health employer toolkit](#), or [mental health worker toolkit](#).