

Confronting Stigma in Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Care

Stigma has a profound impact on communities facing mental health and substance use challenges. For far too long, caregivers and their loved ones have been blamed for their condition, delayed care for fear of being treated differently, and stayed silent. By understanding stigma, we can work together to confront barriers in mental health and substance use treatment.

Stigma's Wide Reach

Stigma—defined as the negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes people may hold towards individuals experiencing mental health or substance use disorder challengesⁱ—often comes from a lack of understanding.

i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Mental Health Stigma. 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/mental-health/stigma/index.html>

ii Rethink Mental Illness. "Stigma effect" stops three in five people experiencing mental illness from seeking help, survey reveals. 2023. <https://www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/media-centre/2023/05/stigma-effect-stops-three-in-five-people-experiencing-mental-illness-from-seeking-help-survey-reveals/>

iii Girma, E., et al. Self-stigma among caregivers of people with mental illness: toward caregivers' empowerment. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*. 2014;7:37-43. <https://doi.org/10.2147/JMDH.S57259>

iv Sharp, M., et al. "Stigma as a barrier to seeking health care among military personnel with mental health problems." *Epidemiologic reviews* vol. 37 (2015): 144-62. doi:10.1093/epirev/mxu012



3-in-5 people

living with a mental illness did not seek treatment due to a concern about how they would be perceived by others.ⁱⁱ



Over 50% of caregivers

caring for a loved one facing mental health challenges reported perceived stigma.ⁱⁱⁱ



60% of veterans

that would benefit from substance use disorder treatment do not seek it, largely due to concerns about stigma.^{iv}

From Misunderstanding to Support

When we confront stigma, we can create a healthier future for our family, loved ones, and ourselves. Addressing stigma can:

- 1 Improve access to care:**
By removing barriers that prevent people from seeking or continuing treatment, individuals are more likely to reach out for help.^v
- 2 Enhance quality of care:**
When health care providers better understand health challenges, they can provide comprehensive, high-quality care.
- 3 Drive policy and systemic improvement:**
Anti-stigma initiatives promote equitable access to health care and encourage balanced, accurate representation in media — laying the groundwork for lasting cultural change.

v Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Mental Health Stigma. 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/mental-health/stigma/index.html>

Change Starts with You

Everyone has a role in overcoming stigma. Here's what you can do to make a difference:

- 1 Educate yourself and others:**
Open and honest conversations with the community, health care providers, and your loved ones are key to confronting stigma.
- 2 Advocate for solutions:**
Support mental health organizations, join an awareness campaign, or contact your representative to promote policies and practices that can support individuals facing mental health and substance use disorder challenges
- 3 Use respectful language:**
Avoid labels and instead use person-first language.



**Check Out FAM Resources
to Navigate Stigma**

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