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STIGMA

Understanding the impact of PREJUDICE and DISCRIMINATION on people with mental health and substance use problems

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A Pan American Health Organization /
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Affiliated with the University of Toronto



YOU PROBABLY KNOW SOMEONE WITH A MENTAL HEALTH OR SUBSTANCE USE PROBLEM

- 1 person in 5 in Canada (over 6 million people) will have a mental health problem during their lifetime.
- 1 in 7 Canadians aged 15 and older (about 3.5 million people) have alcohol-related problems; 1 in 20 (about 1.5 million) have cannabis-related concerns; and some have problems with cocaine, speed, ecstasy (and other hallucinogens), heroin and other illegal drugs.

- Mental health and substance use problems affect people of all ages, education and income levels, religions, cultures and types of jobs.

So it's likely that you or a family member or friend will have a substance use or mental health problem at some time.

WHY PEOPLE DEVELOP MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE PROBLEMS

There are many reasons why people develop mental health and substance use problems:

- Some are genetic or biological—people are born with them.
- Some come from people's experiences—such as stressful situations in their childhood; at school or work; or in places where they lived with injustice, violence or war.

- And sometimes we simply don't know why a problem has developed.

Regardless of why and how they develop, mental health and substance use problems are *health* problems—just like cancer, arthritis, diabetes and heart attacks.

So why are people with substance use and mental health problems looked upon differently?

LET'S TALK ABOUT STIGMA

Stigma refers to negative attitudes (prejudice) and negative behaviour (discrimination) toward people with substance use and mental health problems.

Stigma includes:

- having fixed ideas and judgments—such as thinking that people with substance use and mental health problems are not normal or not like us; that they caused their own problems; or that they can simply get over their problems if they want to
- fearing and avoiding what we don't understand—such as excluding people with substance use and mental health problems from regular parts of life (for example, from having a job or a safe place to live).

We all have attitudes and judgments that affect how we think about and behave toward others. When we talk about negative attitudes and behaviour toward others based on their gender, sexual orientation, culture, race or religion, we use the words **prejudice** and **discrimination**.

*So let's call **stigma** what it really is.*

The effects of prejudice and discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination **exclude people** with mental health and substance use problems from activities that are open to other people.

This limits people's ability to:

- get and keep a job
- get and keep a safe place to live
- get health care (including treatment for substance use and mental health problems) and other support
- be accepted by their family, friends and community
- find and make friends or have other long-term relationships
- take part in social activities.

Prejudice and discrimination often **become internalized** by people with mental health and substance use problems.

This leads them to:

- believe the negative things that other people and the media say about them (self-stigma)
- have lower self-esteem because they feel guilt and shame.

Prejudice and discrimination contribute to people with mental health and substance use problems **keeping their problems a secret**.

As a result:

- they avoid getting the help they need
- their mental health or substance use problems are less likely to decrease or go away.

Making a difference

Here are 7 huge things you can do to reduce prejudice and discrimination against people with mental health and substance use problems:

1

KNOW THE FACTS

Educate yourself about substance use and mental health problems—what can bring them on; who is more likely to develop problems; and how to prevent or reduce the severity of problems.

Learn the facts instead of the myths.

2

BE AWARE OF YOUR ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

We've all grown up with prejudices and judgmental thinking, which are passed on by society and reinforced by family, friends and the media.

But we can change the way we think—and see people as unique human beings, not as labels or stereotypes.

3

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

The way we speak can affect the way other people think and speak.

Use accurate and sensitive words when talking about people with mental health and substance use problems. For example, speak about “a person with schizophrenia” rather than “a schizophrenic.”

4

EDUCATE OTHERS

Find opportunities to pass on facts and positive attitudes about people with substance use and mental health problems.

If people or the media present information that is not true, challenge their myths and stereotypes. Let them know how their negative words and incorrect descriptions affect people with substance use and mental health problems, and keep alive the false ideas.

5

FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE

People with mental health and substance use problems make valuable contributions to society. Their health problems are just one part of who they are.

We've all heard the negative stories. Let's recognize and applaud the positive ones. For example, did you know that Ron Ellis was living with depression at the height of his National Hockey League career?

6

SUPPORT PEOPLE

Treat people who have substance use and mental health problems with dignity and respect. Think about how you'd like others to act toward you if you were in the same situation.

If you have family members, friends or co-workers with substance use or mental health problems, support their choices and encourage their efforts to get well.

7

INCLUDE EVERYONE

In Canada, it is against the law for employers and people who provide services to discriminate against people with mental health and substance use problems. Denying people access to things such as jobs, housing and health care, which the rest of us take for granted, violates human rights.

People with mental health and substance use problems have a right to take an equal part in society. Let's make sure that happens.