

# Stigma, Shame, and Opioid Addiction



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# Stigma: Still the largest barrier to engagement for treatment

Substance use disorders (SUDs) affect more than 20 million Americans aged 12 and over.

Most common disorders are related to marijuana and prescription pain relievers.

9.5 million or 3.8% of adults over the age of 18 have both a SUD and a mental illness.

<https://drugabusestatistics.org/>





**Unshame** CA

**Public stigma is society's negative attitudes toward a group of people, creating an environment where people feel unwelcomed, judged, and blamed.**





3 in 4 respondents do not believe that a person with a SUD is experiencing a chronic medical illness



One in three are unwilling to move next door to a person currently using substances or have them as a personal friend

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More than  
50%

Over half of respondents indicated that a person's SUD is caused by their own bad character or lack of moral strength

71%

of respondents believe that society at large considers those who use drugs problematically to be **outcasts** or **non-community members**

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Stop Stigma. Save Lives: Experiences of stigma by Northern Health BC

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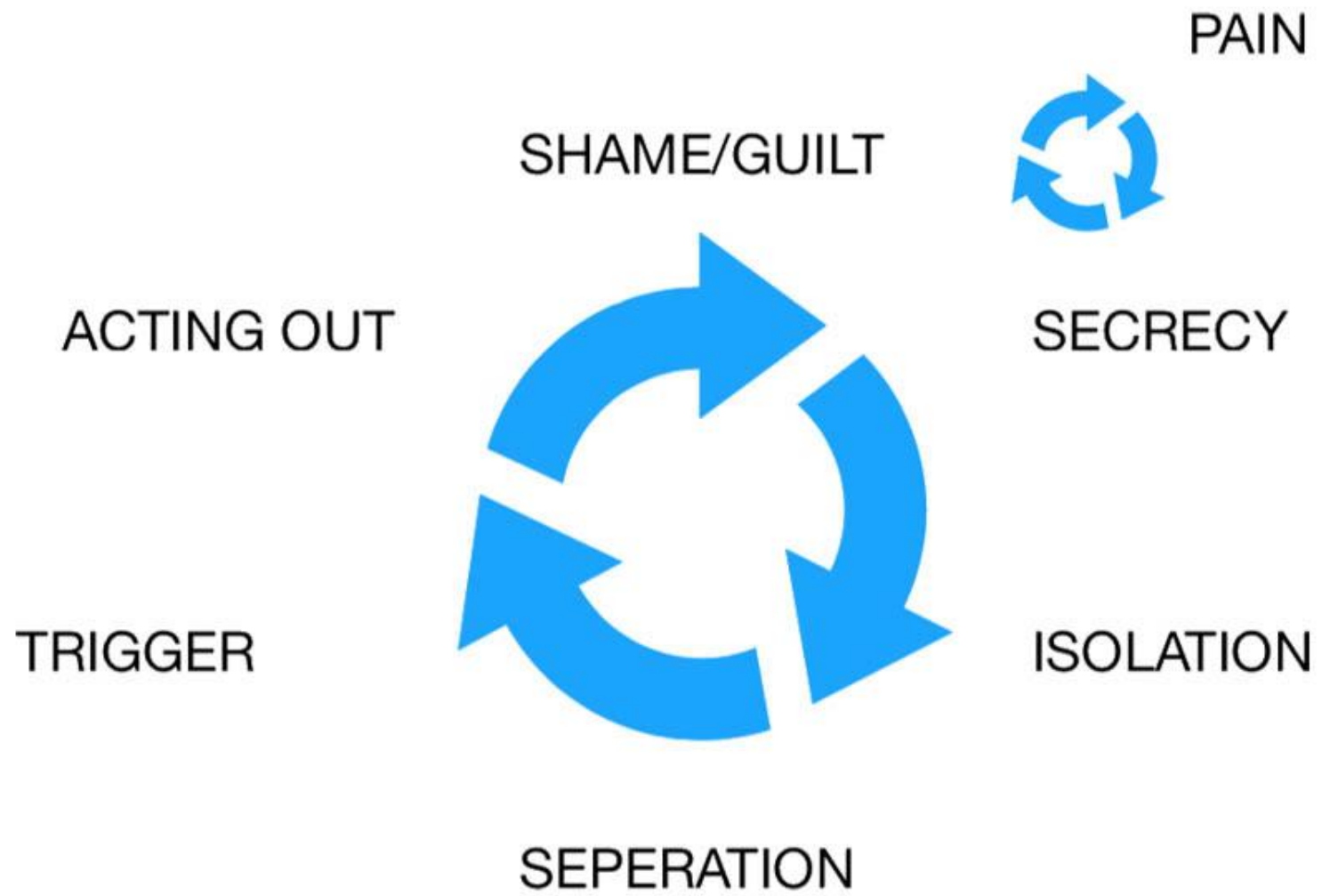


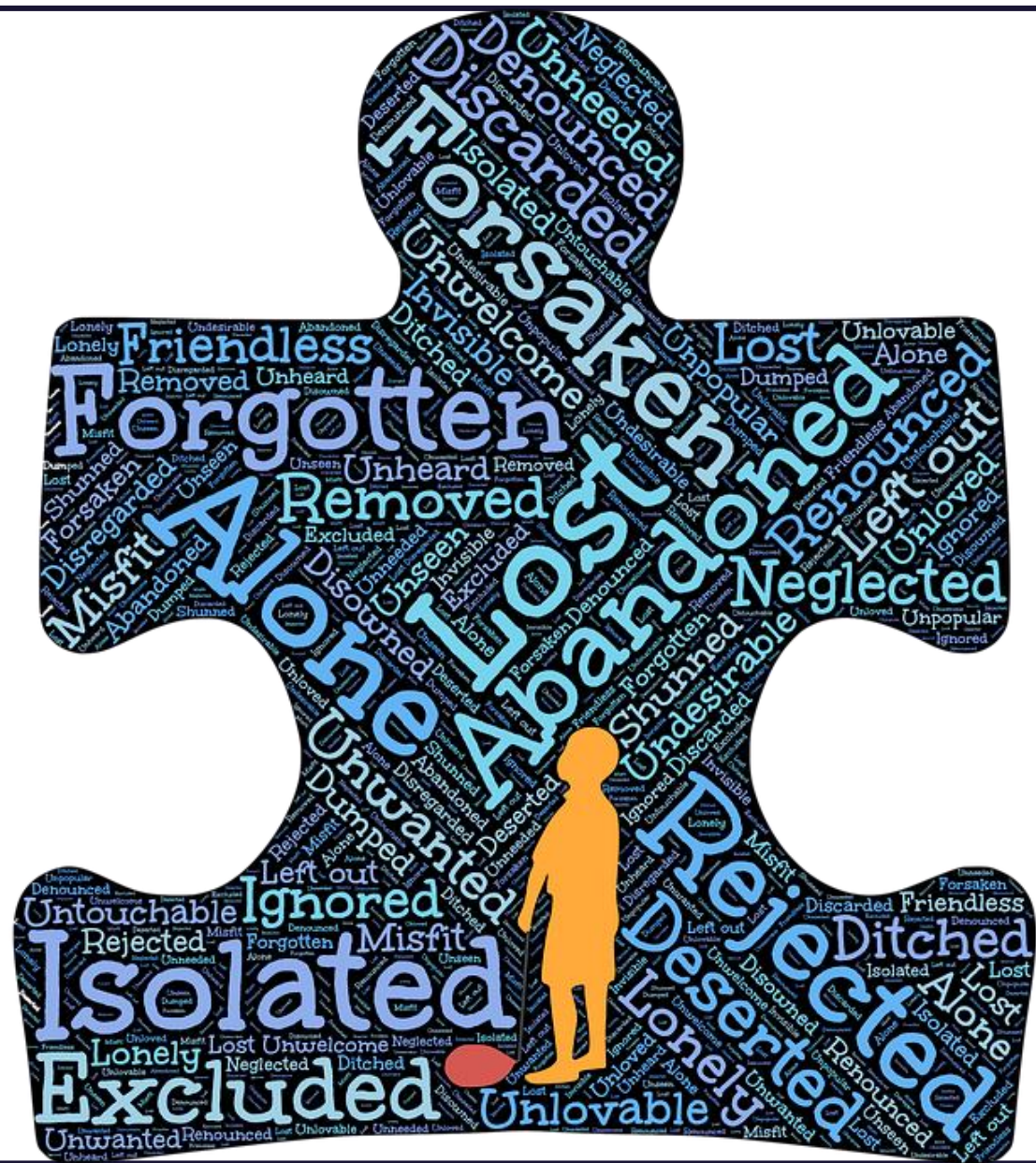


***77% of people  
treated for drug  
use disorder and  
PTSD had at least  
one childhood  
trauma.***

*Source: National Institute of Health (NIH)*

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# We Must Address Stigma

Stigma on the part of healthcare providers who see a patient's substance use disorder as their own fault can lead to substandard care or even to rejecting individuals seeking treatment.

Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse

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A person wearing a dark, hooded sweatshirt stands with their hands behind their back. They are positioned in front of a wall made of vertical wooden planks. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

**Stigma is recovery's  
greatest enemy**

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## Words Matter: Using People-First, Non-Stigmatizing Language

The way health care professionals talk about addiction affects the stigma attached to opioid use disorder, and may influence whether or not people seek treatment. Using clinically appropriate and medically accurate language that recognizes OUD as a disease rather than a moral failing will help to create a stigma-free environment prioritizing treatment and recovery. When in doubt, use people-first language. People-first language prioritizes the personhood of every patient over descriptive social identities and stigmatizing labels.

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# The Real Stigma of Substance Use Disorders



In a study by the Recovery Research Institute, participants were asked how they felt about two people  
*“actively using drugs and alcohol.”*

One person was referred to as a  
**“substance abuser”**



The other person as  
**“having a substance use disorder”**



No further information was given about these hypothetical individuals.

## **THE STUDY DISCOVERED THAT PARTICIPANTS FELT THE “SUBSTANCE ABUSER” WAS:**

- less likely to benefit from treatment
  - more likely to benefit from punishment
  - more likely to be socially threatening
  - more likely to be blamed for their substance related difficulties and less likely that their problem was the result of an innate dysfunction over which they had no control
  - they were more able to control their substance use without help
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Words to Avoid	Words to Use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addict</li> <li>User</li> <li>Abuser</li> <li>Junkie</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Person with an opioid/substance use disorder</li> <li>Person who uses drugs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drug habit</li> <li>Abuse</li> <li>Problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opioid/substance use disorder</li> <li>Use, misuse, harmful use</li> <li>Regular, risky, unhealthy, or heavy use</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clean</li> <li>Former/reformed addict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Person in recovery</li> <li>Abstinent</li> <li>Not actively using</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dirty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actively Using</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clean drug screen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Testing negative for substance use</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dirty drug screen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Testing positive for substance use</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Substitution or replacement therapy</li> <li>Medication assisted treatment (MAT)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relapse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resumed</li> <li>Recurrence of symptoms</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addicted babies/born addicted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Babies born with opioid dependency/ neonatal abstinence syndrome</li> </ul>

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Unshame CA

People with substance use disorder have a treatable medical condition.

Unshame CA



Medication for opioid use disorder is an effective treatment for OUD.

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# RESOURCES

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**Unshame**



**CA**

**TOGETHER TO  
END STIGMA**

**[UnshameCA.org](https://UnshameCA.org)**

**“Unshame California is bringing our community together by shining a light on the stories of people impacted by SUD.**

**Unshame California invites you to treat people without judgment, because no one should face challenges alone.”**

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**"Building a future where our healthcare system, and our society, treats addiction with science and compassion – the way we do with any other chronic illness – so those touched by this disease don't experience shame or stigma."**

**SHATTER  
SHATTER  
PROOF™**

**STRONGER THAN ADDICTION**

**Shatterproof.org**

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RECOVERY  
RESEARCH  
INSTITUTE



## ‘ADDICTION-ARY’ ADVICE

The Recovery Research Institute’s glossary of addiction-related terms flags several entries with a “stigma alert” based on research that suggests they induce bias. A sampling:

### ABUSER, ADDICT

Use “person-first” language:  
Rather than call someone an addict,  
say he or she suffers from addiction  
or a substance-use disorder.

### DRUG

Use specific terms such as  
“medication” or “a non-medically  
used psychoactive substance”  
to avoid ambiguity.

### CLEAN, DIRTY

Use proper medical terms for  
positive or negative test results  
for substance use.

### LAPSE, RELAPSE, SLIP

Use morally neutral terms like  
“resumed” or experienced a  
“recurrence” of symptoms.

[Recoveryanswers.org](https://recoveryanswers.org)





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# End The Stigma



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**HELLO,  
I AM**

*Not my addiction*