

# FACT SHEET

## ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

- 'Stigma' refers to negative attitudes, judgements and stereotypes based on assumptions about an individual and/or a group of people;
- Stigma can prevent people thinking of themselves at risk, limiting the effectiveness of prevention activities and can create a barrier to help-seeking and subsequently to an individual being deprived of assistance and support; and,
- 'Discrimination' results from exclusion and unfair treatment of stigmatised people, and institutional prejudice can exacerbate issues.

Unfortunately, the experience of stigma is the norm rather than the exception amongst many individuals who use illicit drugs, with the World Health Organisation ranking illegal drug dependence as the most stigmatised health condition in the world. Alcohol dependence is listed at number four.

<https://adf.org.au/insights/stigma-and-vulnerability/>

People experiencing drug and other alcohol (AOD) dependence are often portrayed negatively and described as 'manipulative', 'devious', in 'denial' 'addicted'. As a consequence, they are often perceived as undeserving of the range of health services that others in the community are afforded. Societal values toward problematic AOD use inform stigma and discrimination. People who are dependent on drugs are often viewed as blameworthy and dangerous; yet evidence suggests that a significant percentage of people who develop dependence on AOD do so as a consequence, of having experienced traumatic sexual violence. Living with these negative stereotypes can cause people to feel shame, anger, rejection and a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness. This can exacerbate these feelings which already often exist for people who have experienced traumatic sexual violence and in turn can trigger further AOD use.

## IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS WHO USE DRUGS

Stigma and discrimination can change the way people think of themselves. This can impact on self-esteem, mental health and general well-being. As a result, people with AOD problems can be very reluctant to seek help and their families are also stigmatised, being viewed as partly responsible for their relative's drug dependence.



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## THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN STIGMATISING DRUG USERS

The media play a crucial role in amplifying the dangers and fears around drug use and as a consequence, can demonise individuals who use AOD. <https://www.aodmediawatch.com.au/guidelines-for-journalists/>

The ways in which the media report on AOD use, how we as a community respond, and how individuals who use AOD are treated in the criminal justice system both produce and reflect stigma.

The stigmatised treatment of people with drug use problems in our communities is deeply entrenched and widespread.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL IMPACT

Stigma can have a profound psychological impact and can result in feelings of:

- Guilt and self-blame;
- Shame and self-loathing;
- Anger;
- Low self-esteem;
- Being different from others; and,
- Rejection.

Behaviours that result from this psychological impact include:

- Developing AOD problems and dependence;
- Self-harm;
- Suicidal behaviour; and,
- Criminal behaviour.

Stigma is insidious. It judges, labels and stereotypes an individual already experiencing problems associated with their AOD use. The assumption that a person is somehow responsible for the problems they are experiencing as a result of their use means that even when they seek help, the very systems designed to support may exclude them.

Stigma has been shown to worsen stress and reinforce differences in socio-economic status. It can also lead to people prematurely leaving treatment and support services.

Stigmatisation and marginalisation of people affected by drug use can act as a barrier to effective prevention and treatment, thereby creating additional burdens for individuals and their families.

NEED  
SUPPORT

