



Words Matter: The Impact of Our Words

MD Carolina Gorlero
gorlecaro@gmail.com

8/22/2025



Define stigma

Summarize the types of stigma

Describe examples of the impact of stigma

Differentiate stigmatizing and non-stigmatizing language

Apply strategies to end stigma



A World Health Organization study with 14 countries found that SUD was among the most highly stigmatized of 18 conditions.

“Stigma is a degrading and debasing attitude of the society that discredits a person or a group because of an attribute... Stigma destroys a person’s dignity; marginalizes affected individuals; violates basic human rights; markedly diminishes the chances of a stigmatized person of achieving full potential; and seriously hampers the pursuit of happiness and contentment.”

—2015 International Conference on Stigma, Howard University, Washington, DC



Types of Stigma

4

Public Stigma	Attitudes and feelings expressed by the general public
Perceived Stigma	Belief that others have negative cognitions and biases
Self- Stigma	Internalized images and messages from society, communities, or peer groups
Label Avoidance	Avoid or delay in seeking treatment or help to avoid being assigned a stigmatizing label
Stigma by Association (Courtesy Stigma)	Avoidance of family members and others associated with persons who have mental health/SUD
Institutional/Structural Stigma	Negative attitudes and behaviors incorporated into policies, practices, and cultures of organizations and social systems
Health Practitioner Stigma	Stigma, biases, and negative perceptions that impact access, quality, or type of care

Grappone, B. G. (2018, October 15). *Overcoming stigma*. NAMI. <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/October-2018/Overcoming-Stigma>, and Wogen, J., & Restrepo, M. T. (2020). Human Rights, Stigma, and Substance Use. *Health and human rights*, 22(1), 51–60.



Mujer detenida en el norte de México.



WOMEN BEHIND BARS FOR DRUG OFFENSES IN LATIN AMERICA: WHAT THE NUMBERS MAKE CLEAR

NOVEMBER 2020

By Coletta A. Youngers, Teresa García Castro, and Maria (Kiki) Manzur

REPORT



News

'MULE' MUM Brit mum arrested with son, 6, over '£1.6m drug smuggling plot in Mauritius' facing A YEAR in hellhole jail before trial



WORLD
DRUG
REPORT
2025

SPECIAL POINTS
OF INTEREST



Stigma Is Visible and Invisible

7

- **Stigma from within**
 - Blame of self
 - Feel hopeless
- **Stigma from the recovery community**
 - Medications vs. Abstinence
- **Stigma from clinicians and medical providers**
 - The belief that treatment is ineffective
 - Non-compliance
- **Stigma from outside**
 - Choice (moral failing) vs. disease





Cultural Significance of Stigma

Stigma is complex, based on a relationship between an attribute and a stereotype that assigns undesirable labels to a person with that attribute.

Stigma has more than one dimension, and groups with different cultural norms often face additional stigma.

- Race
- Nationality
- Ethnicity
- Other excluded groups

People with lived experience (PWLE) who have a substance use disorder (SUD) and co-occurring mental health (MH) or physical health diagnosis may experience additional stigma.

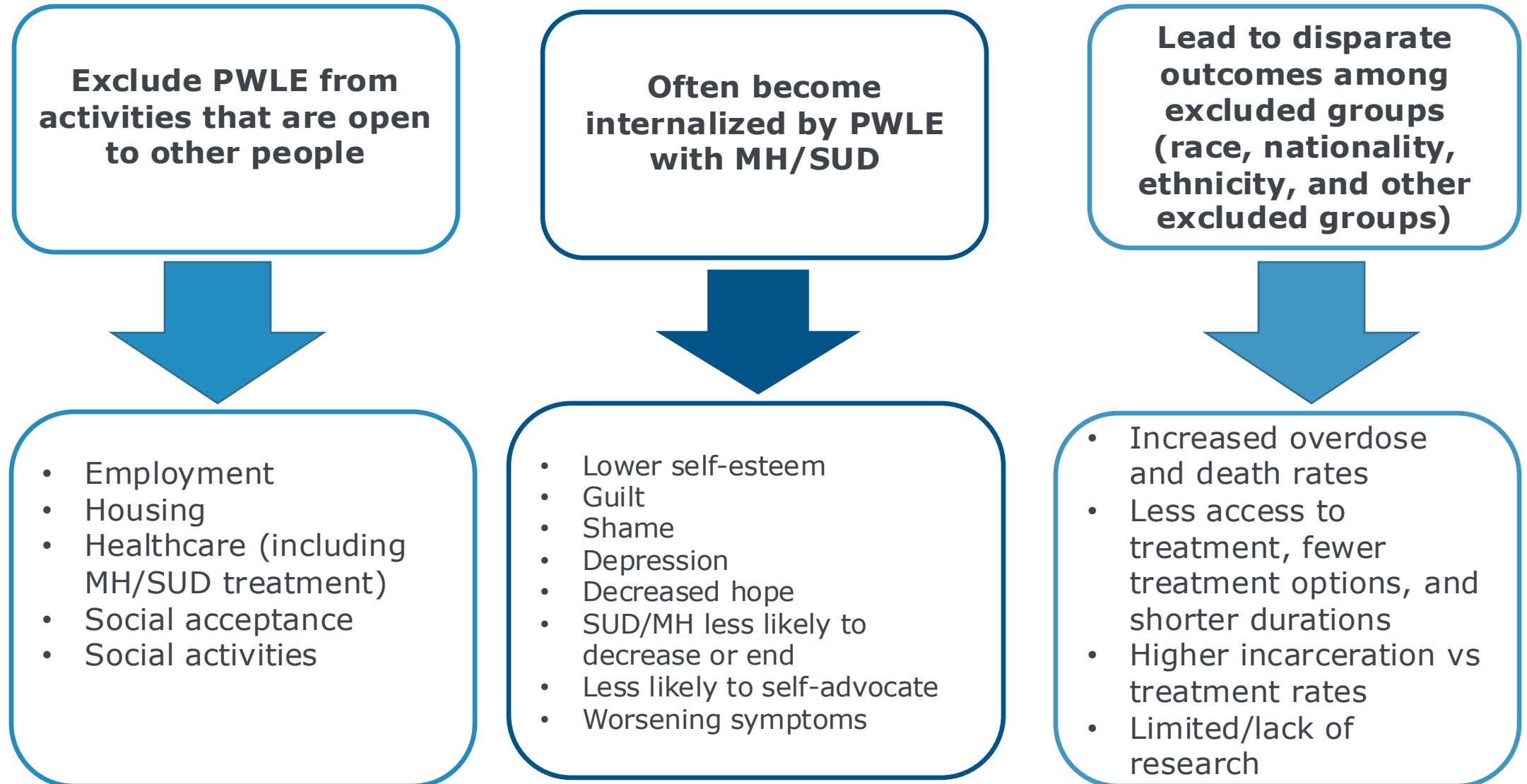
Stigma occurs at increased rates in various settings:

- Justice system
- SUD treatment
- Behavioral health
- Medical
- Social services



Prejudice, Discrimination, and Stigma

9



(Corrigan P., Watson, A., (2002) Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. World Psychiatry, 1 (1):16-20)



Discredits a person or a group

Individuals are socially devalued

Marginalizes affected individuals

Leads to inequality and discrimination

Diminishes achieving full potential

Hampers the pursuit of happiness and contentment

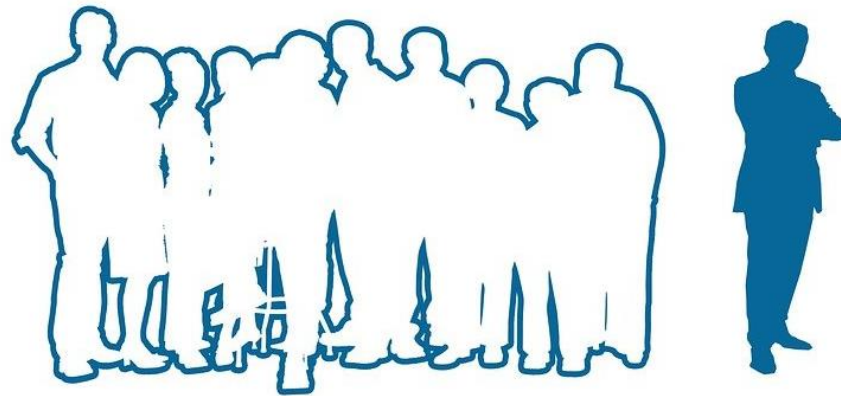
Risks are increased for people and groups experiencing multiple layers of prejudice, discrimination & stigma related to cultural significance.



Individuals participating in a study read similar case studies that used different language to make recommendations of care.

- When the subject was described as a “substance abuser,” punitive action was recommended.
- When described as a person “having a substance use disorder,” therapeutic action was recommended.

This study was replicated with clinicians at two different mental health conferences. The results were the same.



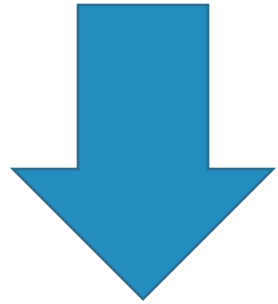
Kelly, J. F., & Westerhoff, C. M. (2010). Does it matter how we refer to individuals with substance-related conditions? A randomized study of two commonly used terms. *The International journal on drug policy*, 21(3), .
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2009.10.010>



Research on People Who Use Drugs (PWUD) Versus Have SUD

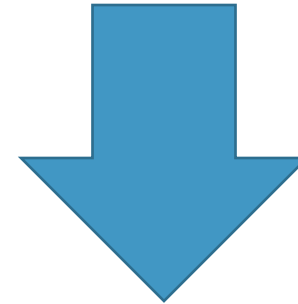
12

**General public polled for biases
towards PWUD/SUD**



- Addict
- Alcoholic
- Medication-assisted treatment
- Relapse

**Positive association toward
people described using**



- Long-term recovery
- Pharmacotherapy
- Medication-assisted recovery
- Recurrence of use

SAMHSA. (2019). *2018 NSDUH: Methodological summary and definitions*.
Ashford, R. D. et al. (2018). *Drug Alcohol Dependence*, 189, 131–138.
Barry, C. L. et al. (2014). *Psychiatric Services*, 65(10), 1269–1272.



Words Are Important



“Words are important. If you want to care for something, you call it a ‘flower;’ if you want to kill something, you call it a ‘weed.’”

—Don Coyhis, Founder, White Bison, Inc and the Wellbriety movement





The Words We Use Are Critical

- Be mindful: Stigma and discrimination occur long before people look for recovery support services.
- Engagement: Use dignified language across the spectrum, including PWUD health, prevention, public and behavioral health, and harm reduction settings.
- Root services in intentionality: Many people carry with them stories of SUD interwoven with culturally significant stigma.
- Seek to understand the whole person.
 - History
 - Exposure to trauma
 - Co-occurring mental health, physical health, and SUD





Use Contact:

- Recovery Messaging
- Role modeling to peers, families, stakeholders & the community
- Holding each other accountable with teachable moments



Use Language:

- Modeling non-stigmatizing & recovery-oriented language
- Performing a language audit



Use Education:

- Science of Addiction & Recovery
- Our Stories Have Power



- Assess your attitudes, beliefs, and practices.
- Stay focused on non-stigmatizing language; use language that is medically descriptive rather than moralistic.
- Educate yourself.
- Be an educator.
- Embrace all pathways to recovery.
- Challenge institutions and practices.

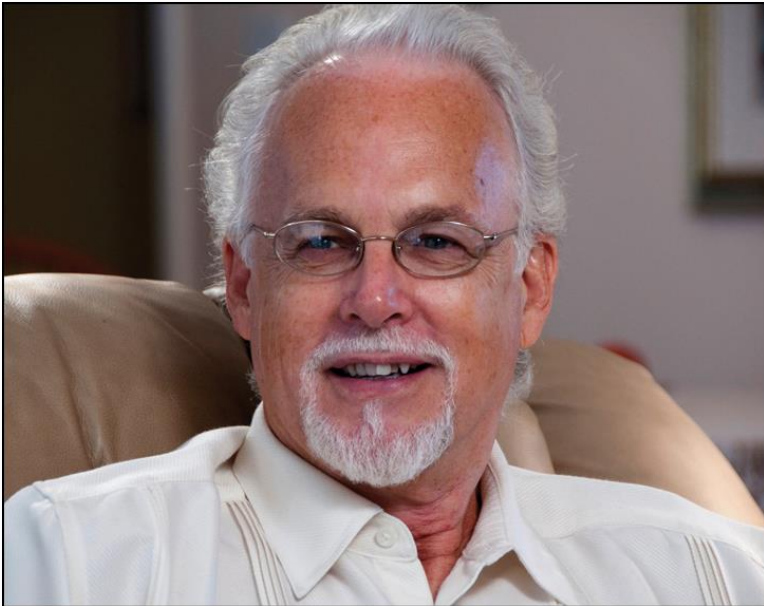




Perform a Language Audit

17

- Use the search-and-replace function for electronic documents. Search for “addict” and replace with “person with a substance use disorder,” or search for “abuse” and replace with “use” or “misuse.”
- Resource: Words Matter: How Language Choice Can Reduce Stigma
 - <https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Words-Matter-How-Language-Choice-Can-Reduce-Stigma.pdf>



“Words have immense power to wound or heal...The right words catalyze personal transformation and offer invitations to citizenship and community service. The wrong words stigmatize and dis-empower.”

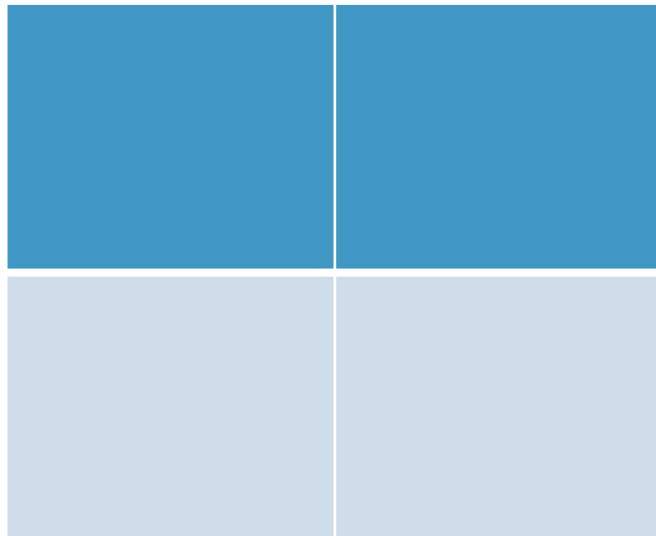
—William White, Author and Recovery Advocate



Take Away Group Activity

19

Step 1: Take a piece of paper & fold it so you have 4 squares. Take 40 seconds, per square, to draw an image of what recovery means. Share and discuss the images.



Step 2: Take 20 seconds to identify the now, how, wow. Share and discuss what the group notices.

Now: Is this a great idea to implement now?

How: Needs a bit of unpacking

Wow: Brilliant and needs to be heard

Step 3: Discuss the intersection of equity. Consider how knowing it can change your narrative, services, perceptions, and interactions with others.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)



- **Intersectionality matters:** gender, poverty, migration, stigma
- **Access to justice and health** are essential for recovery
- **Cultural sensitivity and language rights** as part of care
- **From stigma to empowerment:** recovery is possible





Questions



Thank you!

www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org

gorlecaro@gmail.com