# Substance Use and Stigma

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| **To:** | Chair and Members of the Board of Health |
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## Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

## Key Points

- Stigma comes in many forms and all forms negatively impact individuals who use substances.
- Stigma often prevents individuals who use substances from seeking support and treatment.
- Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) is one of many organizations responsible for educating community on stigma and its impacts.
- WDGPH will be implementing a stigma training program for all employees over the 2024/2025 year.

## Background

Stigma is defined as "negative attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours about or towards a group of individuals because of their situation in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment, and stereotypes, which can isolate individuals who use drugs."[1] Stigma, related to substance use, creates a barrier that prevents individuals who use substances from receiving care they deserve.

There are three types of stigma:[2]

- **Structural stigma:** policies and procedures that health care and social services have in place that impose barriers and increase stigma. For example, this could be policies that prevent individuals who use drugs from seeking care until their drug use is better managed.
- **Social stigma:** negative attitudes and beliefs about individuals who use drugs, including negative stereotypes and language used in media and conversations.
- **Self-stigma:** individuals who use drugs internalizing and believing the negative attitudes and stereotypes that they face every day.

Substance use stigma has significant consequences for the individual who experiences it. Stigma prevents individuals who use substances from accessing the care that they need, specifically social services or treatment. Stigma often causes individuals to feel tremendous guilt or shame regarding their substance use and so they continue to keep their substance use hidden.

Understanding the impact language has been an important first step in addressing stigma. Stigmatising language can leave individuals who use substances feeling unworthy and isolated. Judgmental language contributes to the social stigma that individuals who use substances face. Often, individuals are not aware of how their personal values and beliefs are subtly expressed while they are speaking with others. Language is constantly evolving, so it is important to be aware of current changes and listen to individuals with lived and living experience.
Some examples of mindful language include:

- When using person-first language, refer to the person first before their personal attributes. For example, when speaking about a person who is using drugs refer to them as a "person who uses drugs" rather than a "drug user". Similarly, avoid using the terms "addicts" or "junkies" and use "person who uses drugs" or "person with an addiction or substance use disorder".
- Use medically accurate and neutral language when describing drug use and its effects. For example, referring to drug abuse or misuse as a substance use disorder.
- Substance use in individuals falls on the substance use spectrum (Appendix A).[4] Individuals who use substances, which includes alcohol, cannabis and tobacco, as well as opioids and other drugs, may find themselves at different stages along the substance use spectrum.[4] The substance use spectrum ranges from "non-use" to "substance use disorder".[4]

- Individuals who use substances move back and forth across the various stages of the substance use spectrum.[4] It is not always evident that an individual is experiencing substance use issues and if they are, it may be difficult to know where they may fall on the spectrum. Therefore, it is imperative that the daily language used in engaging with the public and colleagues is not stigmatizing.

## Discussion

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) has developed an internal education program on stigma and the impacts of stigma on individuals who use substances. The goal of the program is multifaceted:

- Educate staff to be aware of their personal values and beliefs that can lead to stigma and how to address their own stigma in their day-to-day work,
- Develop staff understanding of where to direct individuals who seek supports for substance use appropriately,
- Create a benchmark where all staff can address the public's concerns or requests for service in a way that is inclusive and barrier free from stigma.

This education program will be delivered to everyone in WDGPH over the next few months and then evolve into a permanent orientation program for new staff.  An ongoing refresher program for all staff will continue to ensure that the public faces little stigma when they engage with WDGPH staff.

In addition to the internal programming, WDGPH partners with the Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy, the Dufferin Caledon Drug Strategy Committee and multiple other community agencies to support individuals who use substances. Working together these organizations create programs and events that increase individual and community awareness regarding stigma and its impact on the community. WDGPH participates in Overdose Awareness Day events in Guelph, Mount Forest, and Orangeville. This event focuses on the many lives lost to the current opioid crisis and what can do to mitigate these loses. Addressing stigma and its negative impacts on the individual is one approach.

# Health Equity Implications

All members of the WDG community are vulnerable to developing a substance use disorder. As indicated in the Substance Use Spectrum, the level of use varies, and many individuals use substances throughout their lives with few concerns. [4] However, situational crises, like job loss, relationship issues or untreated mental health concerns can increase the risk of problematic use. Stigma often prevents people from seeking treatment which can lead to worsening substance use and a greater impact on all members of the WDG community. WDGPH is working towards educating WDGPH staff, community agencies and the public on recognizing stigma in themselves and how it affects those with problematic substance use.

# Conclusion

WDGPH recognizes that sigma is a serious barrier for individuals who use substances in accessing all types of care. Identifying and naming stigma and supporting the staff of WDGPH to recognize and acquire tools to overcome their own stigma, is a vital first step in supporting individuals who use substances and helping them make positive changes in their lives. Only through education will WDGPH and ultimately the community address and stop stigma and then reach the individuals who are being negatively impacted by substance use.

# Ontario Public Health Standards

## Foundational Standards

☐ Population Health Assessment
☒ Health Equity
☒ Effective Public Health Practice
☐ Emergency Management

## Program Standards

☐ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being

☐ Food Safety

☐ Healthy Environments

☐ Healthy Growth and Development

☐ Immunization

☐ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control

☐ Safe Water

☐ School Health

☒ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

# 2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

☒ Improve health outcomes

☐ Focus on children's health

☒ Build strong partnerships

☒ Innovate our programs and services

☐ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

# References

1. Health Canada. Stigma around drug use [Internet]. 2024. [cited 2024 May 14]. Available from: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/opioids/stigma.html
2. Health Canada. Stigma: Why Words Matter [Internet]. 2024. [cited 2024 May 14]. Available from: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/stigma-why-words-matter-fact-sheet.html
3. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction & Community Addictions Peer Support Association. Overcoming Stigma Through Language – A Primer [Internet]. 2019. [cited 2024 May 14]. Available from: https://www.ccsa.ca/overcoming-stigma-through-language-primer
4. Health Canada. Substance Use Spectrum [Internet]. 2022. [cited 2024 May 14]. Available from: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/substance-use-spectrum-infographic.html

# Appendices

## Appendix A

# SUBSTANCE USE SPECTRUM

People use substances, such as __controlled and illegal drugs__, __cannabis__, __tobacco/nicotine__ and __alcohol__ for different reasons, including medical purposes; religious or ceremonial purposes; personal enjoyment; or to cope with stress, trauma or pain. Substance use is different for everyone and can be viewed on a spectrum with varying stages of benefits and harms.

| NON-USE | BENEFICIAL USE | LOWER-RISK USE | HIGHER-RISK USE | ADDICTION (Substance use disorder) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Avoiding use of substances (abstinence) | Use that can have positive health, social, or spiritual effects | Use that has minimal impact to a person, their family, friends and others | Use that has a harmful and negative impact to a person, their family, friends and others | A treatable medical condition that affects the brain and involves compulsive and continuous use despite negative impacts to a person, their family, friends and others |
| Example: No drugs, tobacco or alcohol | Example: Taking medication as prescribed, ceremonial/religious use of tobacco (such as smudging) | Example: Drinking following the __low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines__, cannabis use according to the __lower-risk cannabis use guidelines__ | Example: Use of illegal drugs, impaired driving, binge drinking, combining multiple substances, increasing frequency, increasing quantity | Example: When someone cannot stop using drugs, tobacco or alcohol even if they want to |

**⟵ A person may move back and forth between the stages over time ⟶**

NOTES
- Drugs, tobacco and alcohol have different effects on a person depending on factors like the substance(s) being used, tolerance, sex, age, weight, and any underlying health conditions, among other factors.
- The best way to avoid any harms from substance use is to avoid use. However, many people use substances without causing significant harm to themselves or others. In some cases, substances have a serious risk of harm at any level of use.