



# Campaign Paper

Everyone knows someone who has experienced addiction at some point in their lives, from substance misuse to gambling or gaming addiction.

Although addiction is a common health issue that requires medical intervention and support, people suffering from this illness are some of the most stigmatised in society, often seen as not even unwell and in some way deserving of their experiences.

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## This is stigma.

Stigma is created through our perceptions, words and actions. It forms stereotypes, judgements and biases, meaning we stop seeing the human being behind the illness.

Stigmatising beliefs and attitudes have a devastating effect on a person's ability to seek help and support. The use of everyday pejorative language towards anyone experiencing addiction erodes an individual's self-esteem, creating feelings of low self-worth and often full resignation that there's no point in looking for help.

## Stigma is like a wall that feels too hard to overcome.

It breeds loneliness and poor health, destroying the lives of people with addiction and those around them. People living with addiction often experience further discrimination because of their age, race, faith and gender. The impact of stigma is far-reaching. It kills individuals, their families and communities.

## But it doesn't have to be this way.

### **Stigma Kills is a public campaign launched by the NHS Addictions Provider Alliance and its supporters.**

The campaign aims to highlight the damaging effects of stigmatising language and attitudes towards those who experience addiction. It asks for all of us as individuals to look beyond the addiction and to see the person behind it and hear their story.

The campaign also aims to break down the myths and misconceptions around addiction demonstrating it is both a mental and physical health condition and not a person's choice.

## Stigma causes death and serious harm to those who experience addiction.

2020 saw record-high numbers of drug & alcohol-related deaths, with 79.5 drug-related deaths and 130 alcohol-related deaths per million people in England alone. This is the highest recorded figure since records began. This shocking statistic can be largely attributed to stigma.

### Stigma kills.

#### **Firstly, by preventing an individual from accessing the treatment they need for their addiction:**

Assumptions and conscious or unconscious biases we make about people who experience addiction mean that those affected do not receive the help and support they need.

It stops people from accessing medical assistance early, often meaning by the time they access support the issues are more difficult to treat and can have serious consequences. In a report commissioned by the NHS APA and conducted by Working With Everyone, it was found that a single negative experience would make an individual less likely to return to treatment.

Stigma can show in the way any healthcare professional speaks to their patient. This can result in people who are seeking help being made to feel that they are a burden no one cares about helping, that they are taking up unnecessary time and that they are not deserving of treatment for their addiction. When people are constantly unable to access the help they need and are even told that it is their fault they are unwell, they begin to internalise this stigma, withdrawing from services.

They may also feel that they can't connect with anyone - and may use substances as a coping mechanism to 'escape' from this isolation and difficult feelings. Studies have shown that loneliness and isolation increase the risk of death by over one quarter (Holt-Lunstad, 2015) and that they can actually be as detrimental to health as smoking 15 cigarettes per day (Holt-Lunstad, 2010). When you combine this with not receiving treatment for a serious health condition such as addiction, the devastating and fatal effects of stigma become clear.

**Stigma kills eventually, as the individual doesn't access the treatment they need for their other health needs.**

**“ People struggling with an alcohol or drug problem should get the same support and treatment as those with any other health condition. ”**

**- Danny Hames, NHS APA Chair**

People with addiction often have other healthcare ailments such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), that they need treatment for. However, when they try to access treatment, this is labelled as drug-seeking behaviour.

**“ I found in the past a lot of doctors ... wouldn't give me painkillers because they assume I want opiates and in fact I didn't! I learnt a long time ago that no opiates are going to help me with pain I'm better off with paracetamol or something 'cos my opiate tolerance is too high ... ”**

**- A participant from our joint report with Working With Everyone.**

Additionally, vicious cycles are common. People are told that their mental health issues have formed as a result of their addiction and that they cannot receive treatment for these until abstinence is achieved.

However, many individuals use substances to cope with their mental health issues and only feel that they could achieve abstinence when their mental health is treated. This is a contributing factor to the increased suicide rate in people with addiction.

**“ My own personal experience is ... every time I've ever told a doctor that I smoke cannabis they go: 'Well, that's why you're depressed.' and I go 'No, the depression started seven years before I even smoked a joint.' and they're like ... you just can't get past that as soon as you say you smoke cannabis most G.P.'s go 'Well that's it! That's the problem! ”**

**- A participant from our joint report with Working With Everyone.**

We firmly believe that rather than treating addiction as a standalone condition, a holistic approach to treatment and recovery must be taken, with co-occurring issues addressed and treated. People with addiction should receive the same parity of care for physical and mental health conditions, as those who do not experience addiction.

## Stigma kills because there is a lack of adequately funded services and interventions:

### **Stigma can manifest itself in the way services are commissioned and policies are set.**

Dame Carol Black highlighted this in her 2021 two-part review of services and urged the government to invest more in the addiction treatment and recovery sector.

Inadequate funding of services can result in a lack of access to housing and wrap-around services that people without addiction would receive.

A lack of investment in training and the workforce has resulted in a lack of skills to manage the complex needs of people with addiction, such as wound care. A focus on reducing crime, whilst important, can result in people with addiction being punished heavily rather than rehabilitated and treated correctly.

Stigma is the first step in barriers to harm reduction, including stigma between types of drugs. Separate clinics are set up in some areas for cannabis users and steroid users, due to a form of 'hierarchy' that is often established due to societal stigma.

Self-stigma, societal stigma and structural stigma all feed into and reinforce each other to create a social norm that excludes people from the resources they need to get better like healthcare, friends, a job and a home. It limits access to health, housing, employment and positive relationships. Everyone should be able to access these resources to achieve their aims in life.



## How can I help?

### See the person, hear their story.

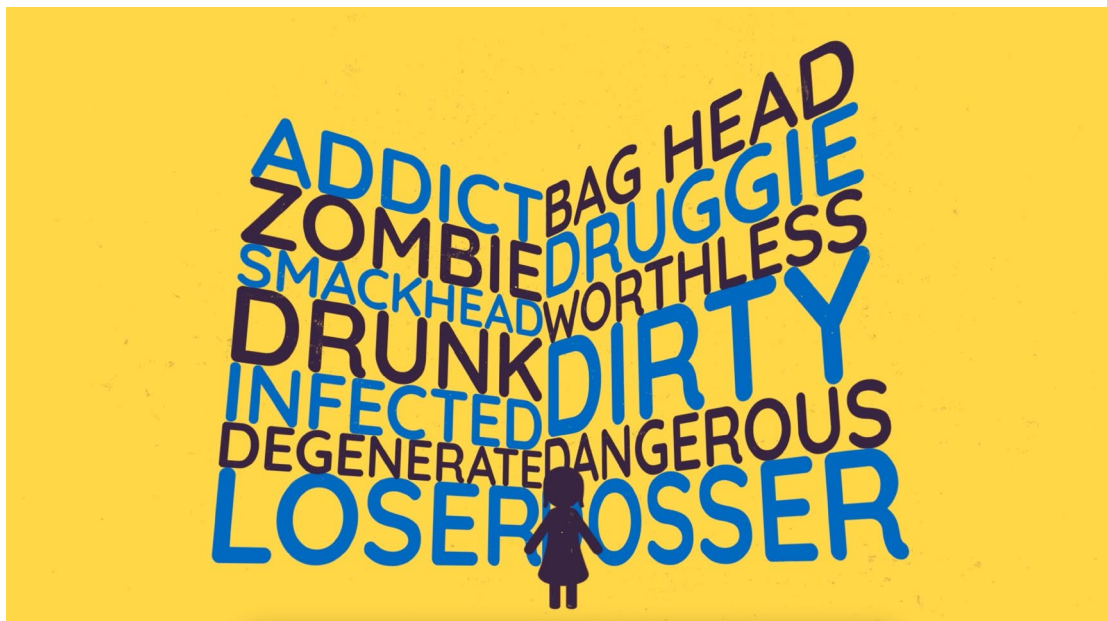
**Part of the problem is that those with a drug or alcohol issue are consistently considered as non-deserving of healthcare or services as they “choose” to use substances.**

Addiction is a mental and physical health condition that has complex effects on the pathways of the brain, meaning that behaviours often continue regardless of consequences.

Addiction can also form part of a self-soothing response when faced with challenges such as the ones posed by stigma. There is a strong link between addiction and trauma such as adverse childhood experiences and PTSD, it can happen to anyone, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, career, age or background.

### Stop the Stigma - How can I help?

We all have a part to play. Let's end the stigma of addiction, challenge our mindsets and think about what help we would want if we or a loved one had been affected. The words we use to describe mental illness or substance use disorders (addiction) can be painful and isolating to people who experience them. Words such as “junkie”, “smackhead” and “druggie” reduce the individual to nothing but their addiction when they are real people who have a story to tell.



So, how can we help?



### Words hurt - consider your language.

Start challenging the derogatory terms you may hear being used to describe addiction. Think about the language you use – are you focusing on the person behind the addiction, rather than their condition? This small change can make a huge difference to the person you're speaking about. Have they experienced trauma through their childhoods or in their lifetimes?

**Do they use substances as a coping mechanism for their hardships, of which you may not even be aware?**



## Addiction is a complex condition and one that has a strong link to adverse experiences.

It is also an illness like any other, and although sometimes there may not be an 'obvious' reason behind why a person is experiencing addiction, it does not mean that they don't deserve the same level of care that they would receive for a physical health condition such as arthritis.



Sometimes, simply asking someone if they are okay opens a door, and can empower that person to take the first steps into seeking treatment for their addiction.

At the NHS APA Conference 2021, Paul Lennon from The Service User Research Group at Kings College London urged us to:

**“ Think of the person sitting across from you as your son or your daughter, really try to put that inside your head. ”**

It is time we break down the walls of stigma and help more people access treatment just by taking a small step today. We can start by thinking about our attitudes, actions and beliefs so we can change things for the better.

We all in fact know someone, who has experienced or is experiencing addiction – no matter who you are, addiction can touch and affect you, even if it's more hidden in some places than others.

### References

Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Med.* 2010 Jul 27;7(7):e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316. PMID: 20668659; PMCID: PMC2910600.

Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Baker M, Harris T, Stephenson D. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspect Psychol Sci.* 2015 Mar;10(2):227–37. doi:10.1177/1745691614568352. PMID: 25910392.



To find out more about the campaign and download additional information and resources please visit [www.nhsapa.org/stigma](http://www.nhsapa.org/stigma)

If you are worried about your health or the health of a family member you can also access support here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/drug-addiction-getting-help/>

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**Thank you for supporting the NHS APA Campaign  
and for helping to break down the walls of stigma.**

By changing how we view and treat people who experience addiction and challenging our preconceived notions, we can begin to break down the barriers that people with addiction face and enable them to access fair treatment and the support that they need to get better. Everyone should have equal access to the treatment, health support and social services they need for a happy healthy life.