



UNDERSTANDING STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH SUBSTANCE USE: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

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Role of schools and educators

Schools play an important role in promoting healthy development and well-being of young people. Besides supporting academic learning, they also provide a safe environment for youth to develop both personally and socially. Importantly, they support youth in their understanding and knowledge related to substance use and associated harms while developing skills to make healthy choices, manage stress, and build self-awareness, adhering to the appropriate grade-level curriculum.¹

Educators are uniquely positioned to influence students' health and well-being and promote healthy choices. As an educator, you do not have to be an expert on substance use, but you can develop knowledge and skills to decrease stigma and support students and their caregivers.¹

Conversations around substance use can be difficult and it's ok to be unsure about how to navigate these conversations. This resource has been designed as a step towards increasing your knowledge, providing resources to get you ready and feel more confident to engage with youth about substance use and reduce stigma.¹

What are opioids?

Opioids are substances used to treat pain but are sometimes used for their euphoric effect. Examples of opioids include fentanyl, heroin, morphine, oxycodone, Percocet, codeine and hydromorphone.²

Fentanyl is an opioid that is approximately 100 times more potent than morphine.³ Fentanyl can be prescribed by a physician or obtained through an unregulated, toxic supply. Use of illegally produced or unregulated fentanyl can lead to unintentional poisoning and death because the strength and composition of the drug is unknown.

Opioids affect how your brain controls breathing. If you take opioids your body cannot tolerate, you can start to show signs and symptoms of an overdose.

Signs of an opioid overdose or poisoning:^{1,4}

- Slow, weak or no breathing.
- Blue lips or nails.
- Dizziness or confusion.
- Drowsiness or trouble staying awake.
- Can't be woken up.
- Choking, snoring, or gurgling sounds.

See also: [Know How to Recognize an Opioid Overdose.](#)⁴

Naloxone is a medication that can temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose or poisoning, providing time to get emergency medical attention by calling 911.

Naloxone only works on opioids. However, naloxone should be administered to a person experiencing an overdose to reverse the effects of any opioids that may be present in the substance taken.⁵

If you would like to learn more about preventing or responding to an opioid overdose and naloxone, please visit york.ca/opioids⁶ or reach out to substance@york.ca.

How common is opioid use among students?

In 2023, nonmedical use of prescription opioids pain relievers among Ontario and York Region students was higher than 2019 levels.⁸

In 2023, about one-in-five (22%) students in Ontario in grades 9-12 reported using a prescription opioid pain reliever (e.g., Percocet, Percodan, Tylenol #3, Demerol, Dilaudid, OxyNEO, codeine) for non-medical reasons.⁷

Based on analysis of York Region data, in York Region 19% of grade 9-12 students reported using prescription opioid pain relievers for non-medical reasons, which is an increase since 2019 (9%). Females (23.6%) are more likely than males (15%) to report using these drugs nonmedically.⁸

What is stigma?

Stigma is when someone sees a person or group of people in a negative way because of a perceived characteristic or shared attribute.¹ Discrimination is when someone treats a person or group of people in a negative or harmful way because of a perceived characteristic or shared attribute. Discrimination is the behaviour that results from a negative stereotype.¹

People may experience stigma and discrimination because of their age, disability, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, Indigenous identity, housing insecurity or because they use substances. These stereotypes may be compounded if an individual holds multiple of these identities and experiences.¹

People who are actively using substances and people in recovery can both experience substance use stigma. Stigma prevents people who use substances from seeking and receiving help, affects their ability to access services and can influence the quality of care and support they receive.¹

Video Link: [Beyond Stigma – Treating Pain in Opioid Use Disorder](#)⁹

Video Discussion Guide: [Discussion Guide](#) and worksheets: [Printer](#) and [PDF-Friendly version](#)

Key takeaways on adolescent substance use

1. Substance use varies from person to person and occurs along a spectrum.
 - Numerous factors can increase the risk of developing substance use complications or a substance use disorder. These include a person's genes, family history of substance use disorder, socioeconomic influences and previous experiences of trauma.¹
 - Adolescents who start using drugs at a young age and adopt regular use run the risk of becoming dependent on them into adulthood.¹
 - Some may use substances and never experience problems, or a substance use disorder.

2. A small percentage of people who use substances develop and experience effects from substances such as:¹
 - Addiction or dependence.
 - Mental health impacts.
 - Decreased health outcomes.
 - Interference with hobbies, interests, time with friends, sleep, work, school and daily routines.
 - Impaired sexual decision making or sexually transmitted infections.
 - A self-medicating cycle which can lead to more challenges, exacerbate emotional and physical challenges and co-occurring disorders.
3. Young individuals are more likely to use substances in harmful ways such as mixing drugs or engaging in impaired driving.¹
4. The unregulated drug supply is becoming increasingly more toxic and poses serious risk to people who use substances.¹⁰
 - Fentanyl and other dangerous substances are being mixed with or disguised as other drugs like heroin, oxycodone, cocaine and ecstasy/MDMA, making them more potent and increasing the risk of an overdose.
 - These drugs can also be unintentionally contaminated (e.g., cross-contamination from poorly cleaned scales) with fentanyl and other dangerous substances.
5. Educators should watch for signs of substance use concerns including changes in personality or mood such as a student becoming uncommunicative, withdrawn, angry, or aggressive, exhibiting a loss of inhibitions, or experiencing a lack of motivation.
 - If concerns are noted, prompt attention, intervention and necessary support should be offered to the youth involved through a [trauma-informed approach](#).¹¹
6. Remind your students that it is okay to reach out for help if they are struggling with substance use and that their struggles do not define them.
 - It's important for adolescents facing substance use issues to recognize that they are not alone; they can seek help and guidance from trusted family members, friends, or professionals.

Key takeaways on stigma associated with substance use

1. It's important to challenge the stigma around substance use—it starts with having open conversations and supporting each other. By encouraging open communication and supporting students in doing the same, educators can play an important role in reducing the stigma associated with substance use.
2. Be mindful of the language you and others use when discussing substance use—using [respectful and accurate language](#) is empowering and helps reduce stigma.
 - Use respectful, non-judgmental, and person-centred terminology when discussing substance use.

- Select your words thoughtfully, recognizing their power to either perpetuate stigma or foster understanding.
- Refrain from using labels or derogatory terms that may stigmatize individuals, and instead, focus on describing behaviours or experiences without attaching harmful labels.

Instead of:	Use:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addicts • Junkies • Users • Drug/substance abuser • Recreational drug user 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who use drugs/substances • People with an addiction or substance use disorder • People with lived/living experience • People who occasionally use drugs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug/substance abuse • Drug/substance misuse • Problematic drug/substance use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug/substance use • Addiction/substance use disorder • Drug dependence • Higher-risk drug/substance use • Substance use harms

3. If you notice any policies or practices that feel stigmatizing or unfair, don't hesitate to speak up—your voice matters in creating a more supportive environment for everyone.
 - Unpack and challenge your own bias and stigma around substance use.
 - Your opinion counts and can influence others, focus on people's strengths.
 - When we all work together, we can build a community that is more welcoming and encouraging to all.
4. Fear-based messaging has been an unsuccessful strategy used in school-based substance use prevention programs.
 - Programs that incorporate harm reduction, peer support models, treatment models and other opportunities to reduce stigma can better support students including those who use substances.
 - Programs that support planning, decision-making, communication, and peer pressure resistance can help students develop critical social-emotional and executive function skills to develop positively and better manage stress.
 - There cannot be a singular approach to substance use prevention.
5. Systemic stigma refers to policies in education, health and social services that increase stigma and barriers to getting help. This type of stigma can be present in the education system's procedures, institutional culture, and policies.
 - Systemic stigma can be unintentionally reinforced by decision-makers, educators, and other staff members in the education system since it is frequently hidden.

6. Internalized stigma or self-stigma and shame can result in feelings of guilt, low self-worth, social withdrawal, and a reluctance to discuss or ask for help when using substances.
 - Safe and supportive school environments that uphold confidentiality and privacy and provide staff training on a [trauma-informed approach](#) can reduce internalized stigma and shame.¹¹

7. Sometimes, even unintentionally, people in positions of authority may reinforce stigma, making it harder for those in need to seek help.
 - While authority figures may not intend to reinforce stigma, it's important to recognize the impact of actions. Aim to create environments that support open communication and access to resources for those struggling with substance use

Self-Reflection Exercise¹

Looking back, have you ever treated a person who uses substances in a negative way? What happened? What do you think was the effect of the interaction on the other person?

Examples:

- *Using stigmatizing language, treating them with less compassion, judging.*

Knowing what you now know about substance use and stigma, are there any misconceptions you've held about people who use substances?

Examples:

- *It's their choice, it's a moral failing, they could get better if they wanted to.*

Additional resources

Topic Area	Resources
Resources for Educators	Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide Substance Use and School: Opportunities to Support Students Substance Use and School: What Youth want Educators to Know Engaging Clients Who Use Substances eLearn Blueprint for Action Resource Hub
Stigma and Youth (Mental Health)	Stomp Out Stigma
The Science of Substance Use Disorder	Insights on Substance Use: Understanding the Science on Substance Use Disorder

Stigma and language	Overcoming Stigma through Language: A Primer Changing the Language of Addiction
Support for people who use drugs and their loved ones	Community Services for Alcohol and Drug Use in York Region

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