

Stigma, Shame and Hepatitis C

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Stigma Defined

- Stigma can be categorized into several broad areas:¹
 - Public attitudes
 - Discriminatory practices
 - Experienced discrimination
 - Perceived stigma
 - Self-or internalized stigma

Simply stated...

Stigma is a complex and powerful social phenomenon that influences the course of illness and marginalizes populations.²

It is driven by perceptions and public attitudes.

What do you see?



Perceived Stigma

- Perceived or “felt” stigma:
 - A fear or perception of stigma and discrimination present in one’s community or society at large.¹
 - A dimension of the construct of stigma and the least written about in the literature on stigma.³
 - Current studies are focusing on how perceived stigma interfaces with
 - Enacted stigma (e.g. directly experienced discrimination based on membership in a stigmatized group)
 - Self-stigma (e.g. shame, negative self-evaluating thoughts, fear) and effects treatment seeking behaviors.⁴

Public Stigma

- Defined as the “ways in which the general public reacts to a group based on stigma about that group”.⁵
- Affects social interactions, social networks, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life.^{6,7}
- Individuals with Hepatitis C and other groups are typically stigmatized because the public perceives them to have character flaws, which in turn, encourage stereotypes, prejudices and negative media messages.^{8,9,10,11,12,13}
- Public stigma is pervasive in our society and is reflected in everyday practices, services, legislation and other mediums in society.

Public Stigma Compounded

- Individuals diagnosed with Hepatitis C are often subjected to even higher levels of public scrutiny, stigma discrimination.
- This phenomenon is called “double deviance”.¹⁴
- The stigma associated with a diagnosis of Hepatitis C is stronger if one is LGBTQ, incarcerated, diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, mentally ill, or homeless.

Shame: Stigma's Companion

- Shame is “an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing one is flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging”.¹⁵
- Shame differs from guilt, in that it is a feeling that results from *behaving* in a flawed or bad way, rather than a flawed or bad *self*.
- Shame is a psycho-social-cultural construct
 - Emphasis on emotions, thoughts, behaviors of self
 - An interpersonal experience tied to relationships and connections
 - Anchored in one's ability to meet cultural expectations.

Feelings of Shame

- Trapped
 - Feeling an unreasonable number of unrealistic expectations has been placed on one's self with few options in meeting these expectations.
- Powerless
 - The experience of overwhelming and painful feelings of confusion, fear, anger, judgment and/or the need to hide.
- Isolated
 - An increase sense of disconnectedness due to lack of consciousness, lack of choice and/or the possibility of change.¹⁴

Effects of Shame

- Shame has as an influential role in a wide range of mental and public health issues
 - Self-esteem/concept issues, depression, addiction, eating disorders, bullying, suicide, family violence, sexual assault, PTSD.^{14, 15}
- Mounting empirical evidence points to shame's importance in treatment and recovery
 - Considered the “master emotion” of everyday life and “pre-eminent cause of emotional distress in our time.”¹⁴
 - A dominant emotion experienced by clients, exceeding anger, fear, grief and anxiety.

So what can we do to reduce stigma and shame associated with Hepatitis C?

- Build Recovery Capital
 - Recovery capital is the breadth and depth of internal and external resources that can be drawn upon to initiate and sustain recovery, improve health and promote resiliency.^{16, 17}
 - Strategies may be aimed at personal, family, community, and cultural levels.
 - Promote patient and public awareness and education about the diagnosis, treatment options, and the value of social support.

Strengths-Based Responses

- Support personal resiliency and public commitment to overcoming barriers to diagnosis and treatment.
- Develop critical awareness about the sources of stigma and shame associated with Hepatitis C.
- Promote the development of sound social support at individual and community levels.
- Speak courageously about Hepatitis C.

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