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”.  
- Affects social interactions, social networks, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life.  
- 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. 
- Public stigma is pervasive in our society and is reflected in everyday practices, services, legislation and other mediums in society.
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 is “an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing one is flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging”.\textsuperscript{15}

Shame differs from guilt, in that it is a feeling that results from \textit{behaving} in a flawed or bad way, rather than a flawed or bad \textit{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.
References


