

Sarah Bagley:

Addiction is a highly stigmatized disease and we even find that some of the treatments that we use for addiction are also stigmatized. Some of the stigmas associated with having an addiction and a general perception in the public, that addiction is the result of a lack of will power, poor choices, or just bad habits that people have. We often find too, that there's stigma associated with the medications we use to treat an opioid use disorder. So we hear in the community some times that we're just substituting one drug for another. One really easy way that we can all try to reduce the stigma associated with addiction is to change the language that we use. So for example, using person first language, so not trying to get rid of terms like addict or alcoholic or terms like abuse and instead say person with a substance use disorder, or person with an alcohol use disorder, or someone who is misusing substances.

Another way that we can reduce the stigma associated with addiction is to use medically accurate terminology. We know that addiction is a brain disease. It's a chronic illness and so we should use terms like we do when talking about asthma, or COPD or diabetes or other chronic medical illnesses when talking about patients who have addiction. For a really long time, people who had substance abuse or alcohol use disorders were viewed as being weak, that they had a habit that they couldn't get rid of and that they just needed to have the willpower in order to overcome what was going on and change there lives. Over the last couple of decades we have had definitive research showing that in fact, addiction is a brain disease. It's a chronic relapsing disease and that people need more than just will power in order to recover from the alcohol or substance use disorder. In our program we handle this a couple of ways.

One is just being really upfront with our patients and telling them that we recognize that this is a stigmatizing disease and we recognize that there might have been a lot of places in there lives that they've been where they've felt judged. Just by showing them that we understand that, patients often will literally just relax in our offices and we can see that they feel like they're in a safe place. We know both through research and from talking to patients that because of the stigma associated with addiction, people are less likely to seek treatment or ask for help. That's because they are worried about being judged or they maybe have family members who are concerned about what it's gonna mean if they find themselves in treatment for an alcohol or substance abuse disorder.

If you have any questions about what the right terms are to use, or what stigma might mean when we're talking about stigma associated with addiction. Feel free to ask people who are experts, or people who maybe have a substance abuse disorder would be happy to talk to you about that. The humility that show by asking expresses the empathy that you have for patients who have substance use disorder.