



# Let's Talk About **Addiction**

**Take the stigma of drug misuse out of the shadows.** In Massachusetts, overdose and death due to opioid misuse have reached epidemic proportions. While addiction is never an easy topic of conversation, it's time to think about addiction differently—and talk about it more openly.

**Tear down the walls.** Deeply ingrained stigmas for people with an addiction disorder can make matters worse. Negative labels—such as “junkie, lowlife or addict”—are degrading and often serve to create self-stigma, hatred, and emotional barriers to seeking treatment. We need to encourage access to treatment and promote recovery, not create barriers.

**Addiction is not a choice. It's a disease.** The opioid epidemic demands new ideas and bold solutions, many of which are now unfolding at statewide and community levels. New treatment programs and laws are based on the understanding that addiction is not a choice; it's a chronic physical, spiritual, and emotional disease.

## Six Ways You Can Help

- 1. Know the facts.** Learn more about the disease of addiction at [mass.gov/stopaddiction](http://mass.gov/stopaddiction).
- 2. Rethink your attitudes.** Changing attitudes can be challenging, but not impossible. By learning more about addiction, you might find that you will feel differently about people with substance use disorder.
- 3. Educate family and friends.** Once you know more, share your knowledge. A “word of mouth” campaign can spread very quickly.
- 4. Avoid stereotypes and discrimination.** Don't group all people with addiction together. With the proper support, many people with addiction problems maintain active, productive lives at work or home. Discrimination at work, in fact, is illegal under several laws.
- 5. Support people in recovery.** Recovery is rarely easy; it may take multiple attempts. Help friends or family reach recovery by offering a sober, supportive environment.
- 6. Advocate for change.** Despite progress, federal laws still prohibit parents with drug convictions from getting food stamps. Others face insurmountable hurdles to finding jobs. Insurance may not cover treatment. Support changes in federal and state legislation that remove unfair and unnecessary obstacles.

### **What you say and do really matters.**

Today it's nearly impossible to not know someone struggling with addiction—and we all can play an important part in turning the tide.

If you reach out to help someone struggling with addiction—or if they talk to you first—here are a few simple tips for keeping things positive.

**Support without judgment.** Being supportive could simply mean serving as a sounding board – someone who will listen without passing judgment. Just talking about addiction with a trusted friend can provide enormous relief.

**The healing power of empathy.** Express your concern and understanding for the situation. Offer your help—it could be a meal, an errand, or a ride. Little favors can make a big difference.

**Platitudes and quick-fix solutions don't work.** Claiming that “the addiction will pass” or “it's just a phase” may seem helpful, but it's rarely good advice – and mostly, it's just not true.

**No, it's not “...their own fault.”** Telling someone struggling that addiction “is their own fault” or “they chose to use” only reinforces the stigma. Keep reminding yourself that addiction is a disease, not a choice.

**While at work or school.** Be mindful that a colleague or schoolmate could be struggling with addiction. Nasty labels or comments can make them afraid to seek help. Avoid stigmatizing conversations and language by offering your insights about the realities of addiction.

### **Get Involved!**

Visit [helpline-online.com](http://helpline-online.com) where you'll find information about:

- Local coalition meetings
- Community overdose vigils
- Recovery support centers and more

Find an open 12 step meeting at [www.nerna.org](http://www.nerna.org)

Show your care. **Join #StateWithoutStigMA.**  
[mass.gov/StateWithoutStigMA](http://mass.gov/StateWithoutStigMA)



Massachusetts  
Department  
of Public Health

**STOP**  
**Addiction**  
IN ITS TRACKS

**#StateWithoutStigMA**



# The Realities of **Stigma**

Stigmas about addiction can take the form of negative language, behaviors and attitudes aimed at people suffering from addiction. They're usually based on misinformation, misunderstanding and fear. Stigma does not encourage or support people with addictions to seek treatment and recovery. In fact, it does the opposite. Stigma actually promotes ongoing, untreated addiction—and all of the harm that addiction brings to our families, our friends, and our communities.

*“When I overdosed, my name was all over the local papers. People said I chose to be an addict, and **called me a horrible mother**. Despite these barriers, I got treatment, and I’ve been in recovery now for 4 years. I am back with my family.”*

- Married mother now in recovery

*“When your child has a chronic illness, you might get a casserole from friends or offers to help with day-to-day activities. But not when it’s an addiction. When my child was in and out of treatment, **I’d do my shopping in other towns so I wouldn’t run into anyone** I knew because I felt people were judging me.”*

- Parent of teenager suffering from addiction

**No one chooses to become addicted to opioids.** Often it starts with a doctor’s prescription and quickly gets out of control. People might do bad, even illegal things because of their addiction, but it doesn’t mean they’re bad people.

**Addiction to opioids is a chronic disease**, much like diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. It often demands multiple attempts at treatment. But it *can* and does work. **Recovery is possible.**

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“I would never admit to a coworker that I had a heroin addiction. In casual conversations, **they’d always throw around labels like ‘addict,’ and ‘lowlife.’** Or they’d say, ‘once a junkie, always a junkie.’ They had no idea how much that hurt me. For a long time, it kept me from getting treatment or emotional support from my friends and co-workers.”

- Person in recovery  
and now back at work

**Opioid addiction is a public health epidemic.** Chances are very good that you know someone who’s struggling with addiction. Negative language and behaviors directed at people with addictions – at home, at work or in the community – force many to hide their “secret” and avoid seeking treatment. Personal or public stigmas ultimately create more harm than good.

“When I went to the doctor to get an insulin shot, **they treated me like dirt** once they knew I also struggled with addiction. Even though I was in recovery, and getting medication-assisted treatment, they left me waiting on a gurney in a hallway for hours.”

- Woman receiving medication-assisted treatment

**Even among some health care providers there is a misunderstanding about how stigma affects people with addictions,** in some cases blocking their ability to seek treatment and maintain their recovery. Even within the addiction community, some people have a stigma against those receiving medication-assisted treatment (MAT).

**When we  
eliminate stigma,  
we can *save lives.***



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