

# Reducing Substance Use Disorder Stigma in the Workplace

Addiction is a complex disease that affects the brain and body, making it difficult to stop using drugs or alcohol despite serious health, social, and career consequences. Already-high rates of substance use disorders—the constellation of symptoms that are involved in addiction—[have been compounded by COVID](#), causing untold heartache for individuals and their families.

Beyond one's personal life, problems related to substance use can exact [a heavy toll in the workplace](#), making it difficult to feel like a productive member of the team.

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**A substance use disorder is not a choice, but an illness that requires support.**

Much like heart disease and diabetes, a substance use disorder is not a choice, but an illness that requires support. By getting access to evidence-based treatment, individuals with substance use disorders can receive potentially life-saving care that can help them recover.

However, people diagnosed with a substance use disorder face significant stigma, and will be more likely to reach out for support if they know they will not be blamed or shamed. Learn about substance use disorders and get actionable ideas to support colleagues who may be struggling with substance use.



**Hi! I'm Kendall Brown, PhD**

I'm a clinical psychologist and Workforce Transformation Manager at Lyra, your mental health benefit. I'm passionate about destigmatizing mental health care and helping you improve your mental health at work and at home.

# What is substance use disorder?

According to the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMSHA\)](#), “Substance use disorders occur when the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.”

Substance use disorders are not limited to illegal drugs. An individual can develop a substance use disorder by using legally obtained substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, or cannabis, or when using certain medications, such as opioids.

## Substance use disorders, by the numbers



According to a recent study, 60% of individuals surveyed have admitted to increased drinking due to COVID-related stress. As with any disease, certain populations are disproportionately affected by substance use disorders, but help is available.

### Did you know?

2x

Individuals with substance use disorders are twice as likely to have another mental health condition such as depression or anxiety—a combination that may require specialized treatment.



Only 12% of individuals who are diagnosed with substance use disorders receive evidence-based care.



One-third of people who are treated for alcohol use have no further symptoms after one year.

#### Sources:

- Grossman, Elyse R et al. (2020). “[Alcohol Consumption during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Survey of US Adults.](#)” International journal of environmental research and public health vol. 17,24 9189. doi:10.3390/ijerph17249189
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- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). [2017 NSDUH Annual National Report](#). Retrieved Feb 24, 2022
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# How to talk about substance use disorders

Every opportunity to discuss substance use disorders—or any mental illness—represents an opportunity to reduce stigma and help those on your team feel empowered to share when they are struggling and seek support when needed.

## Considerations for conversations

Being mindful of the words we use when talking about substance use disorders is an important step to reducing the stigma.

### Instead of...“addict,” “user,” “alcoholic”



Try...“**person with a substance use disorder**”

**Because...** Person-first language is less stigmatizing. By using more neutral, less judgmental words, we communicate that a person has a problem rather than implying the person is the problem.

### Instead of...“alcohol abuse,” “drug abuse,” or even “substance misuse”



Try...“**substance use**”

**Because...** “Misuse” and “abuse” suggest deliberate misconduct or a moral failing. Contrary to common misperceptions, addiction is not a sign of weakness or a character flaw.

### Instead of...“habit”



Try...“**substance use disorder**”

**Because...** Using words like “habit” undermines the seriousness of the disease and inaccurately implies that a person with a substance use disorder is choosing to use substances and can therefore choose to stop.

#### Sources:

- Lyra Health. (2021). [Addiction in the Workplace: How to Prevent, Identify, and Address Employee Substance Use](#). Retrieved Feb 24, 2022
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- Kelly, J. Saitz, R., Wakeman, S. (2016). [Language, Substance Use Disorders, and Policy: The Need to Reach Consensus on an “Addiction-ary.”](#) Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 34:1, 116–123, DOI: 10.1080/07347324.2016.1113103
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# Tips for reducing the stigma of substance use disorder in the workplace

Left untreated, substance use disorders can become more disabling over time. However, [feeling stigmatized](#) can reduce an individual's willingness to seek care when it is needed. It's crucial to approach those with substance use disorders from a place of compassion and understanding. Below are some tips for how to reduce stigma and increase support for those in your workplace who may be struggling with substance use.

- **Humanize the individual.** Build understanding about the difficulties those with substance use disorders may experience, and see these individuals as valuable people, not just an illness.
- **Create a culture where employees feel comfortable.** If employees fear that there will be negative repercussions for sharing when they are experiencing difficulties, it's less likely they will seek care when it is needed.
- **Reduce barriers to care.** Make the process of getting help simple and effective. Support individuals with substance use disorders by providing the space to access care without concern that their employment is in jeopardy. Confidential support is available from Lyra.
- **Show compassion.** Those experiencing substance use disorder, as well as their support network, will need understanding as they navigate their care and recovery.

## Get access to care

The societal shame and blame associated with substance use disorders can prevent people from getting the care they need. Through Lyra, people can work with a mental health provider who specializes in treating substance use disorders and take control of their mental health.

[Learn more about Lyra today.](#)