

# Ebel: Stigma is Compounding our Addiction Crisis

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

Stigma can be defined as a mark of disgrace or shame associated with a particular circumstance or person. For addicted people and those in recovery, and more generally, those with any type of substance abuse or mental health disorder, stereotyping leads to prejudice, discrimination, fear, shame, distrust, and creates additional barriers to treatment and recovery.

Addiction-related stigma not only impacts the person hurting from addiction, but also causes pain for family members, employers, and friends surrounding that individual. It can also create additional barriers that prevents a person from seeking the support that they need.

The behavior of stigma often leads the public to believe that addiction is not a treatable health condition. Therefore, funding toward treatment or harm reduction strategies is frequently cut short.

Those who are uninformed or uneducated about addiction may think that drug users have a personal weakness or moral failing which led them to make poor choices, or that they simply lack the willpower or the moral fiber to choose to stop using their drug.

But the reality is that whether someone started taking a drug as a prescription or for recreational use, a variety of factors influences someone's risk for addiction. The genes that we are born with, family history, and our biology account for about half of a person's risk for addiction. The earlier the drug use begins, especially for teens, the more likely the impact on their still-developing brains will result in addiction. Environmental factors such as economic status, peer pressure, parental guidance, a history of physical and sexual abuse, childhood traumas, and stress can all increase a person's likelihood of drug use and addiction. The more risk factors a person accumulates, the greater the chance of addiction when taking drugs.

Drug addiction is a complex disease. Over time, changes to the brain can occur in ways that make quitting hard. Mental health and substance use conditions often co-occur. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), almost two-thirds of the over 45 million adults with a mental illness, and almost 90 percent of the over 21 million adults with substance use disorders, go without treatment in the U.S. every year.

Substance-related disorders are treatable health conditions, but without proper treatment and support, which can be different for different people, quit attempts often fail or relapse occurs.

Combating stigma starts with breaking down misperceptions about mental health and promoting recovery and healthy communities. In Licking County, we are working to make addiction recovery resources available for those in need to reduce harm and to prevent drug abuse. Just as importantly, we also need to work on eliminating stigma so that people are comfortable asking for help.

*For information on Licking County's addiction resources and referrals, dial 2-1-1, or text your zip code to 898211. Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A.*

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