

In Massachusetts currently 5 people per day die of opioid overdose. This is now the leading cause of death among older teens and young adults, almost doubling the number of deaths caused by car accidents. This issue has become so prevalent that there is hardly a person alive who does not know someone affected by a loss from opiate overdose.

In addition to drug use being very difficult for families to live with because of illness, injury, and possible death, there is a terrible stigma in our society associated with this problem. This makes it hard for families to be open with their friends and other family and may contribute to lack of recognition of a problem and treatment seeking.

In the medical world, addiction is viewed as a chronic brain disorder from which people can and do recover. These are people who are sick, not bad. Socially though, people with substance use disorder are often thought of by others as lacking in moral character and viewed far more negatively than persons with other physical or psychiatric ailments. These attitudes need to change if we want people to seek early treatment and get well.

One small thing we can all do to help reduce the stigma associated with the disease of addiction is change some of the language around addiction so it is less stigmatizing:

- Rather than the terms drug addiction or substance abuse (“abuse” is a word with negative connotation) the better term is “substance use disorder”.
- Rather than the terms “drug addict” or “addict”, the better term to humanize the person is “person with substance use disorder”.
- Instead of using the terms “clean” or “dirty” to describe where the person currently is on the substance use spectrum the better terms are “not currently using” or “currently using”. “Person in recovery” is also a non-negative term for someone who is not currently using.
- There is also much stigma associated with medication assisted treatment for substance use where the person is viewed as merely “substituting one addiction or drug for another”. People who take daily medication for other ailments are not stigmatized the same way. Rather than calling this type of treatment “substitution” or “replacement” the better terms are “treatment” or “medicine” or “medication assisted treatment”.

Unfortunately substance use is becoming a national tragedy. For more information refer to <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/stop-addiction/current-statistics.html>. And as always you may call the nurse in your child’s school with any questions.