

Breaking the Stigma: Your Insights on Addiction

Key Findings from a Survey of 130 People with Lived Experience of
Addiction (May 2026)

Introduction

This paper presents key findings from *Breaking the Stigma: Your Insights on Addiction*, a survey of 130 people with lived experience of addiction. Respondents were asked 9 multiple choice questions and 2 open ended questions in May 2026.

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Summary of findings

The responses from this survey paint a consistent picture: stigma remains a real and damaging force in people's lives, shaping how they feel about themselves, how long they wait before asking for help and how they navigate recovery.

Respondents point clearly to what needs to change — better public education and more responsible media portrayal chief among them.

Yet alongside these challenges, something equally significant emerges: despite the stigma that exists in the wider world, there is a powerful sense of empathy and solidarity among those with lived experience of addiction.

The strongest message in this survey is one respondents return to again and again — *you are not alone, and asking for help is an act of courage, not weakness*. That message, and the evidence behind it, deserves to be heard widely.

Detailed findings

Our interpretation of the key findings is as follows:

Persistent social stigma

The vast majority of respondents believe that stigma remains a significant issue in society.

While many see signs of progress, the presence of stigma is almost universally acknowledged.

- **93.8% of respondents** feel there is still stigma around addiction.
- **36.9%** describe it as "a lot of stigma," while **56.9%** believe it exists but is improving.
- Only **0.8%** of respondents feel that there is no stigma at all.

Stigma as a barrier to recovery

Stigma is not just a social discomfort; it has tangible consequences on when and how individuals seek help, often delaying life-saving treatment.

- **53.1% of respondents** reported that stigma prevented them from seeking help sooner.
- Specifically, **42.3%** stated that stigma delayed their recovery by **years**.

Older respondents were more likely to report long-term delay

A clear pattern emerges by age group. The data suggests that older age groups (41 and above) were almost twice as likely to delay seeking help by years compared to the youngest age group (18-30).

- **18 - 30: 25.0%** (4 out of 16 respondents)
- **31 - 40: 36.36%** (8 out of 22 respondents)
- **41 - 54: 47.5%** (19 out of 40 respondents)
- **55+: 46.15%** (24 out of 52 respondents)

Misconception of choice vs. disease

A primary driver of stigma identified by respondents is the public's failure to view addiction as a medical condition, instead framing it as a personal failing.

- **84.6% of respondents** identified "misunderstanding addiction as a choice rather than a disease" as a main source of stigma.
- **79.2%** cited a general "lack of education about addiction" as a contributing factor.
- **62.3%** have experienced judgment directly from family or friends, where these misconceptions are often most personal.

Inequity in healthcare perception

There is a profound sense that addiction is not afforded the same level of empathy or professional care as other chronic health conditions.

- **96.2% of respondents** believe addiction is treated worse than health conditions like diabetes or cancer.
- **66.2%** of the total respondents feel it is treated "**much worse.**"
- **43.8%** reported experiencing judgment or discrimination specifically from **healthcare professionals.**

The role of media in reinforcing stereotypes

The media is perceived as a powerful force that largely sustains negative public perceptions rather than challenging them.

- **89.2% of respondents** believe the media reinforces negative stereotypes about addiction.
- **43.1%** feel the media "**mostly**" reinforces these stereotypes, while **46.2%** say it happens "**sometimes.**"
- Only **6.9%** believe the media helps reduce stigma by sharing positive recovery stories.

Overwhelming support from those in recovery

There is a strong empathetic community for those who are in recovery. Here is a selection of the answers from question 10:

- "As you open up you will be amazed how much support is available and how many people you would never expect have been affected by addiction."
- "There is a whole community of people in recovery just like you waiting to help!"
- "Your addiction holds the shame, not you. You are worth it."
- "It's a sign of strength to ask for help, not a weakness."
- "You're never on your own, there is a whole community willing to support you."