

The Media Guide to Stigma-Free Reporting on Substance Use Disorders & Addiction

What is stigma? Negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that create barriers to treatment and recovery.

Media representation matters: 49% of opioid epidemic news stories use stigmatizing terms¹ like “addict” or “substance abuser,” while 78% of stories² focus on criminal justice. When presented in this way, rather than addressing substance use disorders and addiction and medical conditions, **it shapes public opinion and policy decisions.** How addiction is portrayed in news stories directly impacts public support for treatment and the willingness of people to seek help.

The Current Impact of Stigmatizing News Coverage

Research shows concerning patterns in addiction reporting:

- **78% of opioid stories** focus on criminal justice rather than health solutions²
- **49% of coverage** uses stigmatizing language like “addict” and “substance abuser”¹
- **Only 12% of stories** include recovery perspectives³
- **Racial disparities exist:** White individuals are more likely to be humanized as struggling with a medical condition, while Black and Latino individuals are disproportionately portrayed as criminals⁵

The Social Impact

- **54% of Americans** know someone with substance use disorder⁴ (SUD)
- **44% are unwilling to socialize** with someone who has SUD
- **74% don’t understand** that (SUD) is a chronic medical condition like diabetes or heart disease⁴
- **47% wouldn’t want them as a close friend**⁴

Loneliness and isolation can actually contribute to a person increasing their drug use.



How the Media Can Reduce Stigma

Guideline	Instead of	Say This
Use Person-First Language	Addict, Junkie, User, Substance abuser	Person with substance use disorder or Person who uses drugs
	Recovering addict, former addict	Person in recovery
	Substance abuse	Substance use for illicit drugs and substance misuse for prescription medications
	Drug habit	Substance use disorder, opioid use disorder, addiction
	Opioid substitution or replacement therapy	Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) or opioid agonist therapy
	Clean or Dirty (test results)	Testing negative for drugs or testing positive for drugs
Guideline	Don't	Instead Do This
Frame as a Health Issue, Not Crime Story	– Lead with arrest/crime details – Sensationalize overdose scenes or show drug paraphernalia as primary visuals	– Highlight the science of addiction and the fact that it is a medical condition like diabetes or heart disease – Feature evidence-based treatment options, like medication for opioid use disorder (Methadone, Buprenorphine). – Showcase community resources support, treatment and harm reduction.

MYTH: People with addiction don't want help.

FACT: More than 8 out of 10 people with substance use disorders don't get treatment. Many factors prevent people from seeking help, including stigma, lack of access, fear of judgment, and systemic barriers.

Visual Guidelines

Guideline	Instead of Showing	Show This
Treat people with dignity and respect by not showing dehumanizing or sensational photos	Drug paraphernalia (needles, pipes, pills)	Treatment facilities and healthcare settings
	Images of active drug use or overdose situations	Community support and family connections
	Mug shots or arrest footage as primary visuals	People engaged in recovery activities
	Stock photos that reduce people to stereotypes	Photos that show dignity and humanity

Ethical Guidelines for Photography

- Get Permission First
- Explain why you're photographing and where images will be used
- Remember that people accessing treatment value their privacy
- Consider that visuals can lead to loss of housing, employment, or arrest
- Permission cannot be given by someone under the influence

Create Context Through Captions

- Use person-first language in all photo descriptions
- Include quotes from interviews to add depth
- Avoid identifying details if safety is a concern
- Focus on the whole person, not just their condition

Story Angles to Consider

Solution-Focused Stories

- **"Recovery Spotlight":** Profile people thriving in long-term recovery
- **"Treatment That Works":** Cover evidence-based programs
- **"Community Solutions":** Report on local harm reduction efforts
- **"Policy Success":** Cover treatment courts and diversion programs

Address Common Treatment Stigma

Medication for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD):

- **Misconception:** 43% believe MOUD "substitutes one drug for another"⁴
- **Reality:** FDA-approved, evidence-based treatment that reduces mortality by 50%⁵
- **Coverage tip:** Include addiction medicine expert explaining how MOUD works like other chronic disease treatments

Dispel Myths About Harm Reduction:

- **Misconception:** Enables drug use
- **Reality:** Reduces overdose deaths, HIV/Hepatitis transmission, connects people to treatment
- **Coverage tip:** Focus on life-saving aspects and community health benefits

Quick Reference Checklist

Before publishing, ensure you have:

- [] Used person-first language throughout (person with SUD, not “addict”)
- [] Framed addiction as a chronic medical condition, not moral failing
- [] Included at least one recovery perspective and one treatment expert
- [] Listed local treatment resources and national helpline (1-800-662-HELP)
- [] Avoided images of drug paraphernalia or active use
- [] Provided context about treatment options and hope for recovery
- [] Asked permission before photographing people in vulnerable situations
- [] Fact-checked medical information with addiction medicine specialists

Story Source Recommendations

- **Medical:** Addiction medicine physicians, substance use treatment clinicians
- **Lived Experience:** People in long-term recovery (1+ years), recovery coaches, peer support specialists
- **Policy:** Treatment advocates, public health officials
- **Community:** Community leaders who support recovery

Data Resources

National Sources

- [SAMHSA Media Resources](#)
- [Shatterproof](#)

Connecticut-Specific Resources

- [New Haven Health Department](#)
- [CT Department of Public Health:](#)
- [CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services](#)

References

Sources Cited in Text

1. [McGinty, E.E., et al. \(2019\).](#) *An analysis of news media coverage of opioid addiction stigma.* *Preventive Medicine*
2. [McGinty, E.E., Kennedy-Hendricks, A., Baller, J., et al. \(2016\).](#) *Criminal activity or treatable health condition? News media framing of opioid analgesic abuse in the United States, 1998–2012.* *Psychiatric Services*, 67(4), 405-411
3. [Reuters Institute Studies](#)
4. [2024 Shatterproof Addiction Stigma Index](#)
5. [Bosworth, K.T., et al. \(2024\).](#) *Mass media portrayals of substance use disorders: A scoping review of stigma and bias.* *Health Communication Research, Sage Journals*

Additional Sources Consulted

- [National Institute on Drug Abuse.](#)
- [“Best Practices and Recommendations for Ethical Reporting on Addiction.”](#)
- [“Best Practices and Recommendations for Ethical Reporting on Addiction – Creating Visuals.”](#)
- [Associated Press Stylebook, Mental Health and Addiction Guidelines.](#)