

Empathy Lens: *Humanizing Images & Education* *for Reducing Stigma Against* *People Who Use Drugs*

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ADAI Information Team



*Photo from the Empathy Lens collection
– Recovery Cafe*

Meg Brunner, MLIS

- Specializes in info management, dissemination & accessibility
- ADAI alum for over 25 years
- Project web developer

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- Specializes in graphic & educational design
- ADAI alum for over 9 years
- Project photographer



*Photo of the Empathy Lens collection
photographer!*

What we use images for



News & Events

Improve Lives, Prevent Deaths
How to Develop a Comprehensive Approach to Prevent Overdose Deaths and Improve the Health of People Who Use Opioids
A guide for community organizations & policymakers

ADAI

ADAI NEWS & EVENTS, PUBLICATIONS

Assessing Engagement in Cannabis Policy:
A Survey of WA State Elected Officials
KARLITA L. CORREIA, MS, DOMP, APR, 2022

ADAI Report

ADAI NEWS & EVENTS, POLICY, PUBLICATIONS

Empathy Lens
Humanizing Images & Education for Harm Reduction
EmpathyLens.org

ADAI NEWS & EVENTS, EVENTS

Improve Lives, Prevent Deaths
How to Develop a Comprehensive Approach to Prevent Overdose Deaths and Improve the Health of People Who Use Opioids

New ADAI Report: Assessing Engagement in Cannabis Policy: A Survey of Washington Officials

Learn How to Reduce Stigma in 2 Upcoming Webinars about the Empathy Lens Project (May)

LEARN ABOUT TREATMENT
for you, your family member or friend, or your community

ABOUT US GET STARTED

Treatment Options
This section provides information about the evidence-based treatment options for opioid use disorder and addiction. Learn more about these options and what might work for you.

For Professionals
This section features resources, tools, and information for professionals who work with people who have opioid or stimulant use disorder.

For Family/Friends
This page provides information and links to help you better understand opioid or stimulant use disorder and how you can support someone you care about.

Medications for Opioid Use Disorder

ADAI Bulletin
Substance use research, practice & prevention news in Washington

March 2025

Welcome to the **ADAI Bulletin**, a collection of news, events, and resources for use treatment, recovery, and prevention in Washington.

News from ADAI

workforce SPOTLIGHT initiative

New Video Series: Workforce Spotlight Initiative

The **Northwest ATTC** recently launched the **Workforce Spotlight Initiative** interviews with addiction workforce members that aim to showcase the positive aspects of their important work and AK will be featured bimonthly.

Sign up for the [Northwest ATTC newsletter](#) to get up to date.

CannTalk Discussion Guide

ADAI | CANNABIS EDUCATION & RESEARCH PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON | PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES | School of Medicine

Medicinal Cannabis and Chronic Pain
— ONLINE TRAINING FOR PHYSICIANS —

Approved for AMA PRA Category 1 Credit™

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Supporting Recovery from Opioid Use:
A Peer's Guide to Person-Centered Care



Empathy Lens Project



*Humanizing Images &
Education for Reducing
Stigma Against People
Who Use Drugs*

*Funded by Region 5 of the Network of the National Library of
Medicine (NNLM) | Outreach & Education Award – June 2024*

Problem we're trying to help solve

48.5 million people

age 12 or older in 2023 had an SUD in the past year



Over 4/5^{ths}
didn't receive
treatment

Of those who wanted tx but didn't seek it:



74%

Thought they should have been
able to handle their substance
use on their own

44%

Were worried what
people would think or
say if they got treatment



Problem we're trying to help solve (cont.)



35%

worried info
wouldn't be
kept private



34%

afraid bad
things would
happen



39%

didn't know
where to go for
help

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is smiling and looking down at a chessboard. She is wearing a dark blue sweater with white cuffs. A man with short brown hair is sitting across from her, looking at the chessboard. The chessboard is on a white table, and several chess pieces are visible. The background is a light blue wall with a framed picture. The entire image has a light blue overlay.

(Anti-)Stigma 101

What is stigma?

- Negative or unfair beliefs someone has about something
- Mark of shame or discredit

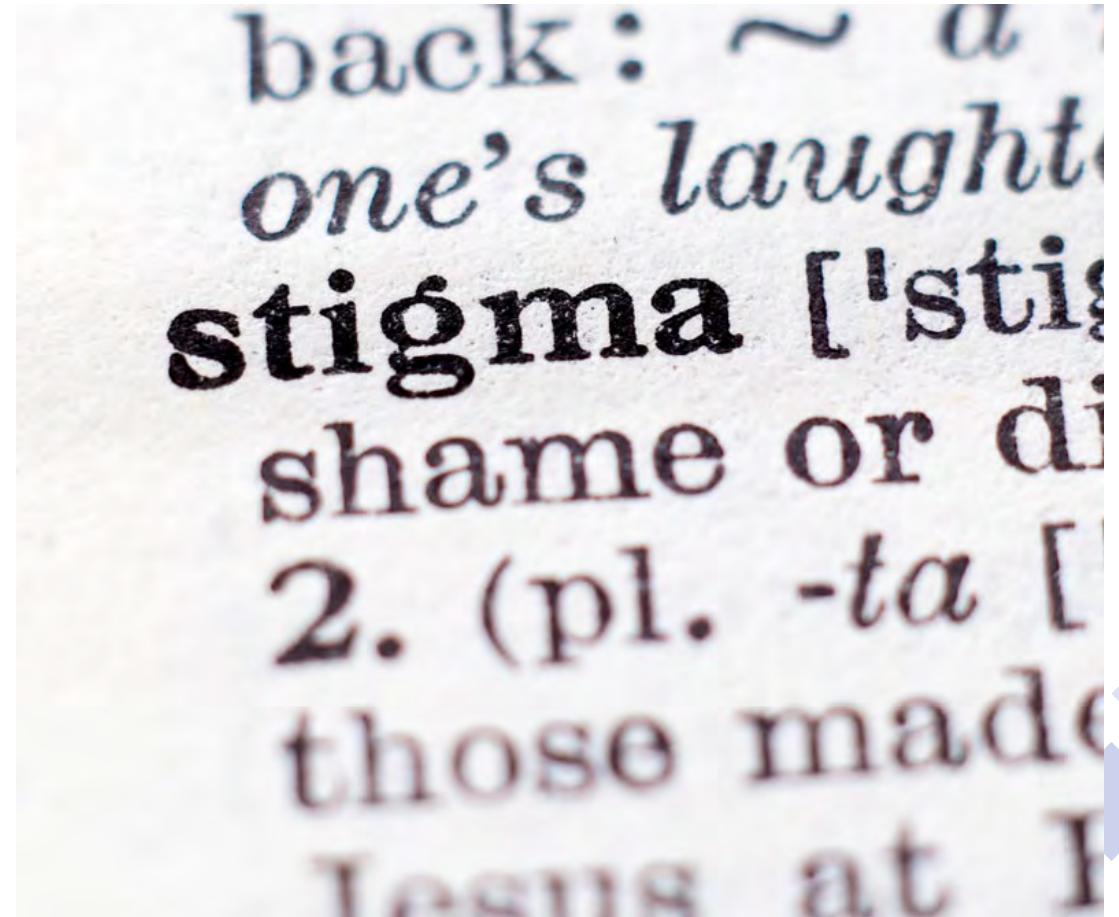


Image source: Shutterstock

Stigma impacts

- Dehumanization
- Treatment hesitancy
- Lower rates of:
 - Healthcare delivery
 - Help-seeking
 - Treatment retention
- Poorer health outcomes



Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Stigma – Three types

Self-stigma

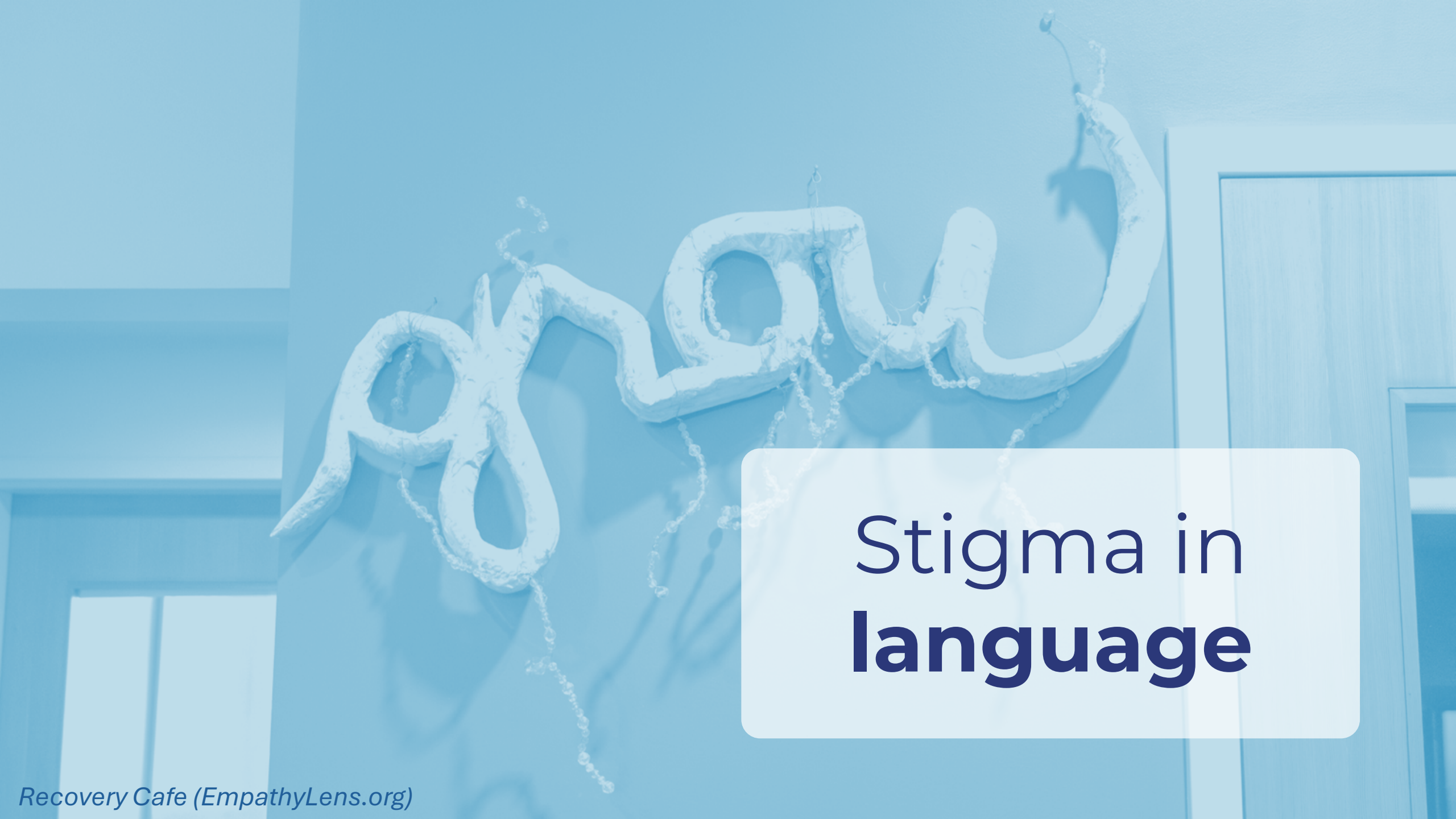


Public stigma



Structural stigma





Stigma in **language**

Stigmatizing language effects

- Feelings of blame or disgust
- Increased implicit bias
- Increased desire for punitive action/punishment
- Increased perception someone is dangerous
- Make people afraid to help



Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Language tips

- Use **person-first language**
- Use language that reflects the **medical nature of SUD**
- Use language that **promotes recovery and hope!**
- Avoid **slang**, idioms, and jargon



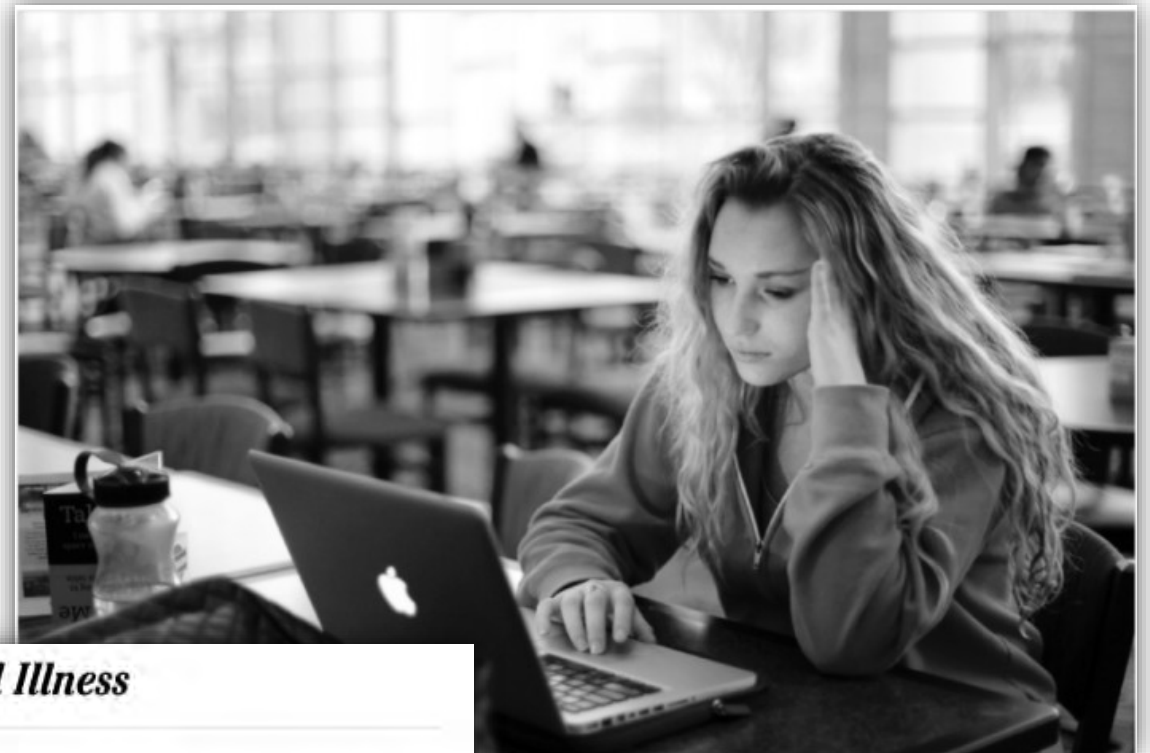
Image source: Some guy on the internet

Stigma in **images**



Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Images can do good!



A Closer Look at Mental Illness

By Tracy Anderson June 25, 2016



When Eliza Smith, 19, went off to college, she was excited to leave behind her old school, her old routines—and her old mental health challenges.

Smith started struggling with depression early in high school. With help from her doctor, she began to get better.

She had been doing so well the summer before college that she stopped therapy when she began school at Xavier College, West Virginia. But a few months into her first semester, she relapsed.

Smith was too exhausted to get out of bed. On days she did make it out of bed, she would fall asleep on the couch. All she wanted to do was disappear.

Interacting with people took all the energy she had. When she did, it was hard to silence the babble of negative thoughts in her head.

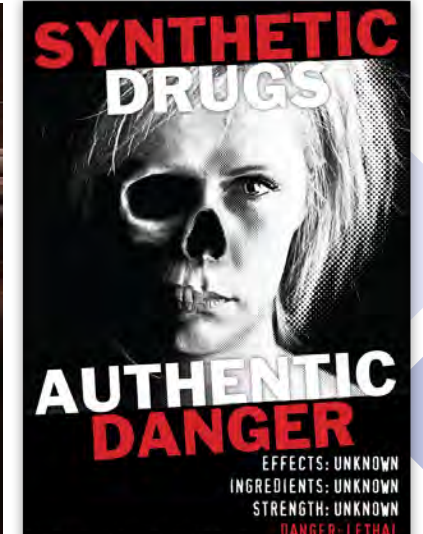
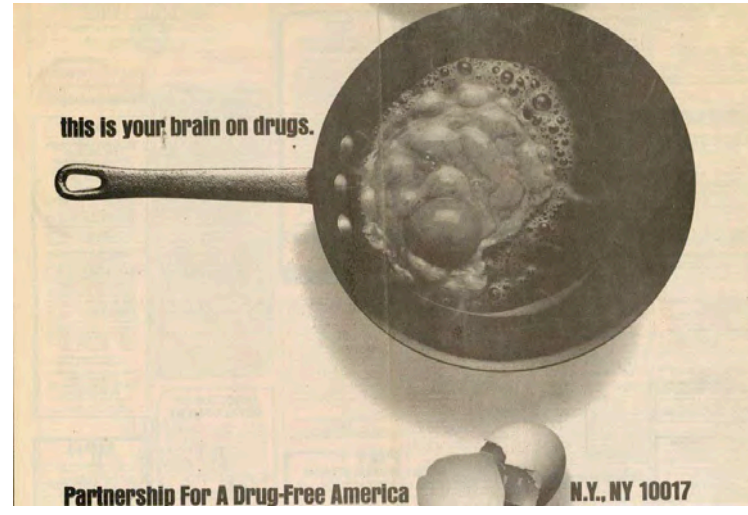
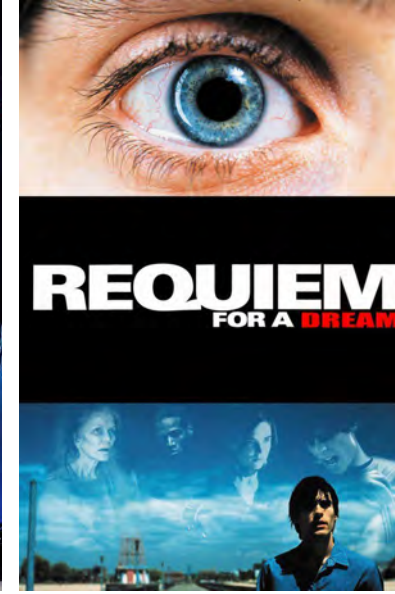
Images can do harm!

- Reinforce stereotypes and prejudice
- Change how someone thinks, feels, responds to topic
- Perpetuate misinformation
- Trigger craving/cue reactivity



Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Media portrayals of drug use



Media portrayals of drug use (cont.)



Egan, 2018 (New York Times)



Richards, 1994 (book)

Prevention campaign imagery

Faces of Meth prevention campaign



Prevention campaign imagery (cont.)



Non-stigmatizing images



What about non-stigmatizing images?



A person injecting drugs



A person receiving medication treatment for drug addiction



A person receiving medication treatment for drug addiction in jail



Emergency services attending to a person who has had a drug overdose



A person with drug addiction in recovery



A person with drug addiction in recovery



A person with a photo of a family member who died from overdose

Images impact stigma, emotions

Person in recovery reduced stigma



Active drug use increased “disgust”



MOUD: Community vs. jail settings

Community MOUD reduced anger/disgust



Jail MOUD did not



NIMBY attitudes – no change



Syringe services program (EmpathyLens.org)

- **48.4%** treatment program
- **26.2%** syringe services program
- **22.3%** safe consumption site

Photos can reduce stigma!



Tacoma Needle Exchange (EmpathyLens.org)

A woman with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a denim jacket, is smiling and looking down at a desk. In the foreground, a person's hands are visible, holding a small white object, possibly a syringe or a small container. The background shows a bulletin board with various papers and a sign that says "OPEN". The entire image has a blue tint.

The **Empathy Lens** Project

Empathy Lens: Background

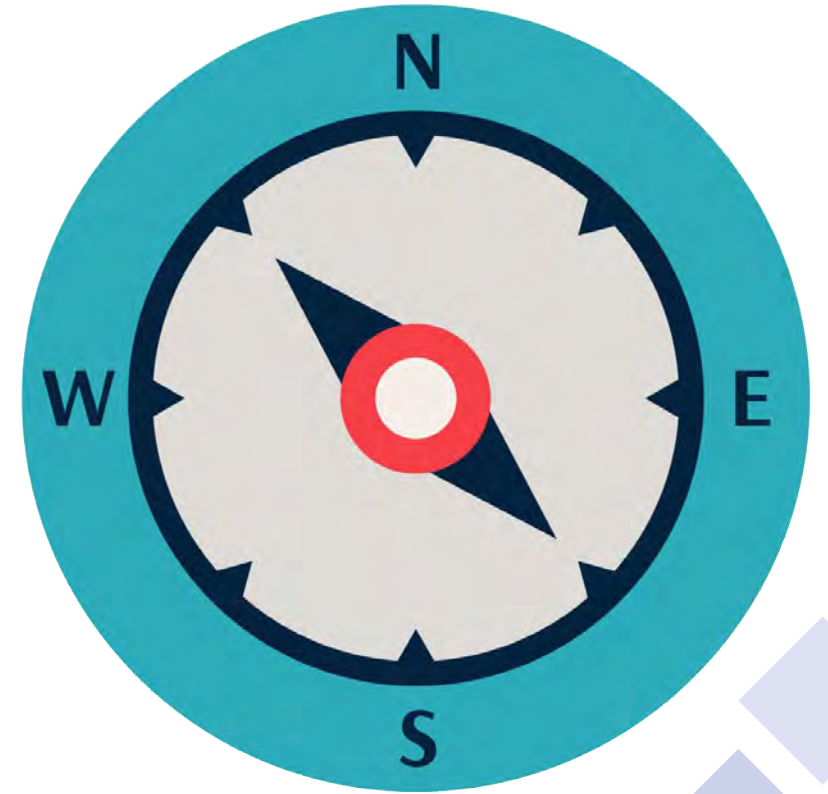


- **Problem:** hard to find good images of substance use-related services
- **Larger problem:** existing stock photos are stigmatizing & incorrect
- **Solution:** create a collection of images ourselves by partnering with community orgs!

*Funded by the Network of the National Library of Medicine (NIH)
Outreach & Education Award – June 2024*

Empathy Lens: Goals

- **Real life** spaces, supplies, interactions
 - *Show services in a humanizing way*
 - *Staff volunteers instead of clients*
- **Collaborate with orgs** on intentions and accuracy
- **Offer collection for free** & without restrictions to remove barriers for use
- **Educate the public** on stigma



Empathy Lens: Making the collection

- **Three site visits**

- Blue Mountain Heart 2 Heart
Walla Walla

- Tacoma Needle Exchange
Tacoma

- Recovery Café SLU
Seattle

- Over 200+ photos edited!



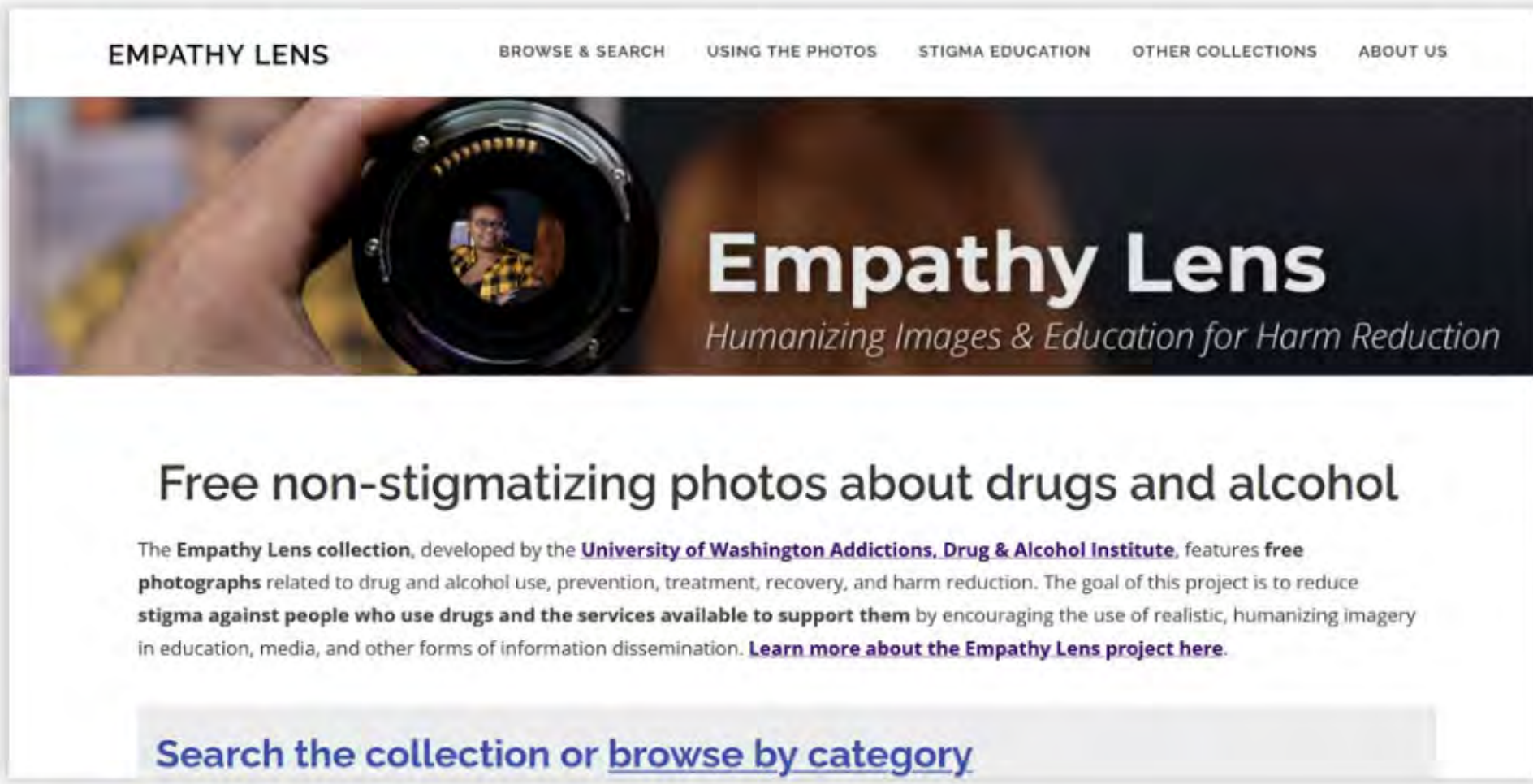
Empathy Lens: Making the collection (cont.)



EmpathyLens.org

- FREE photo collection
- Stigma education
& *printable brochure!*
- Other collections

Empathy Lens: Website tour



Empathy Lens: Photos



Empathy Lens: More Photos



Empathy Lens: Stigma education



The header of the Empathy Lens website features a navigation bar with links: [EMPATHY LENS](#), [BROWSE & SEARCH](#), [USING THE PHOTOS](#), [STIGMA EDUCATION](#), [OTHER COLLECTIONS](#), and [ABOUT US](#). Below the navigation bar is a large banner image showing a hand holding a camera lens. The lens reflects a person in a yellow and black plaid shirt. To the right of the lens, the text "Empathy Lens" is displayed in a large, bold, white font, with the subtitle "Humanizing Images & Education for Harm Reduction" in a smaller, italicized white font below it.

Stigma Education

Research shows that stigma against people who use drugs can cause serious harm, like being rejected by others, losing a job or child custody, or even going to jail. It can also make it harder for people to get health care or other kinds of support because they fear being judged.

Below, you can learn about stigma, how words and images can make it worse, and what you can do to help reduce it.

What is stigma and how does it affect people who use drugs?

Empathy Lens: Stigma education (cont.)

What is stigma and how does it affect people?

Stigma is negative opinions or judgments about others. In terms of drug use, stigma means looking down on someone who uses drugs or has an addiction (also called a "substance use disorder").

Stigma can happen anywhere, including healthcare. For people who use drugs, stigma can:

- Make them feel ashamed, left out, or treated unfairly
- Make others see them as less than human
- Lead to worse healthcare, not seeking or getting help, and poorer health

Our choices matter

The words and images we choose can increase stigma. For example, calling someone a "junkie" or an "addict" makes it seem like drug use is their whole identity.

Instead, using "person-first" language (like "a person with a substance use disorder") recognizes that they are more than their addiction. The same idea is true for images.



Pictures are powerful!
They shape how we think and feel,
sometimes without us even realizing it.

How can I choose images that aren't stigmatizing?

Here are some tips on selecting images that don't spread stigmatizing ideas about people who use drugs or services that help provide support:

- 1. Watch out for misinformation**
Make sure images don't spread false information.
- 2. Avoid triggering images**
Stay away from images of drugs or drug supplies unless you need to explain something specific.
- 3. Show different kinds of people**
People who use drugs (and those who help them) come from all races, genders, and ages.
- 4. Keep it positive and simple**
Avoid dramatic, sad, or scary images. Show everyday people in normal, supportive situations.
- 5. Make it humanizing**
Avoid images that focus on the drugs instead of the person. Use images showing them as full people, not as just their drug use.

Do:
Someone getting safer use supplies. They look happy to get care from someone helpful and kind.

Do:
A welcoming, friendly contingency management session, one of the few proven treatments for stimulant use disorder.

Examples:



Stigma in images

How to avoid stereotypes and humanize people who use drugs

Download:
[empathylens.org/
stigma-education](https://empathylens.org/stigma-education)

Order for free via
ADAI Clearinghouse
adaiclearinghouse.net

Other collections

Other free image collections:

- The Gender Spectrum Collection
genderspectrum.vice.com
- Sexual Health & Liberation Photo Collection
bhocpartners.org/health-photos
- Disabled and Here Collection
affecttheverb.com/collection
- Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Public Domain Photo Database
jsad.com/photos

Info on substance use:

- UW Addictions, Drug & Alcohol Institute
adai.uw.edu
- LearnAboutTreatment.org
learnabouttreatment.org
- LearnAboutCannabisWA.org
learnaboutcannabiswa.org
- Medline Plus
medlineplus.gov

A photograph of four people sitting around a white table in a modern, brightly lit cafe. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. In the center, there is a white rounded rectangle containing the title text. The people include a young man on the left, a person with long hair and a beanie in the foreground, a woman with long dark hair in the background, and a man wearing a face mask on the right. A sign with the word 'know' is visible on the wall behind them.

Selecting **Non-Stigmatizing** Images

Study overview: Hulsey et al.

- **Studied reactions** of people with lived SUD experience to SUD-related images
- Diverse backgrounds, all in recovery
- Small sample size
- More research in this area needed



Study overview: Hulsey et al. (cont.)

Results

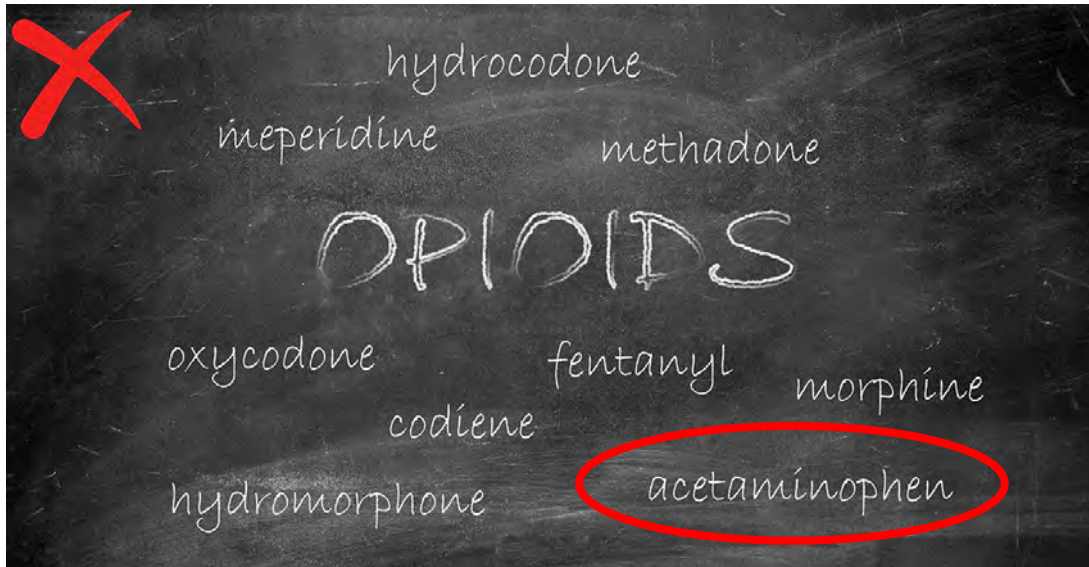
- **Cue reactivity** to images of drug use and drug supplies
- **Dramatic, staged, negative** images triggered negative associations with recovery & treatment
- **Care, support, and positive medical treatment** images reinforced health & wellbeing
- **Diverse representation** important



How to pick non-stigmatizing images

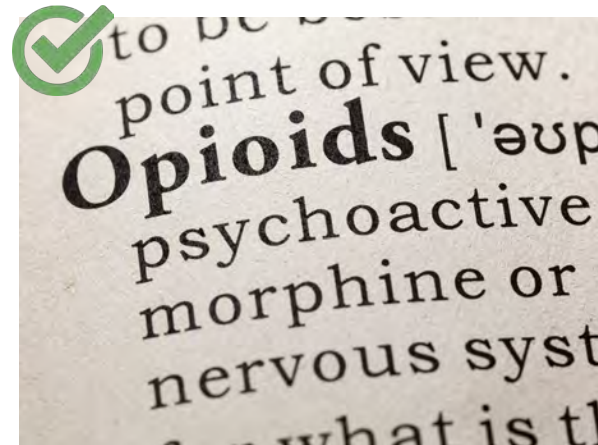
- Avoid misinformation
- Avoid triggering images

Dramatic or negative, drug use/drug supplies



How to pick non-stigmatizing images (cont.)

- **Show different kinds of people**
- **Keep it positive and simple**
Everyday people in normal situations, broader concepts
- **Make it humanizing**
Focus is on them as a whole person, not just their drug use



Activity 1: Stigmatizing or not?

Dramatic

Person is clutching their face in distress

Dehumanizing

Their face is blurry & obscured while the drugs are in focus

Triggering

Shows drug supplies (not for education)



Activity 2: Stigmatizing or not?

Normal

Subject and scene are casual and realistic

Humanizing

Subject is shown as a whole person



Positive

Shows them receiving support & health care supplies

Activity 3: Stigmatizing or not?

Dramatic

Gives a sense of
impending
crash/doom



Misinformation

Implies that methadone
treatment leads to death

Activity 4: Stigmatizing or not?



Dehumanizing

Person is hidden,
anonymous,
reduced to their
circumstances

Dramatic

Tone is scary
and intense

Triggering

Shows someone in a
harsh environment



Activity 5: Stigmatizing or not?



Humanizing
Subject looks
happy to be
receiving
services



Normal
Setting is neutral
and realistic

Positive
Focus is on
getting support &
care navigation



What's Next for **Empathy Lens?**

What's next?

- Expand the collection
 - *More site visits!*
 - *Diverse populations, topics, settings*
- On the hunt for travel funding
- Sharing our work & stigma education



Thank you to our partners!



All amazing organizations & people doing great work!

Questions?



Contact us

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 ***EmpathyLens.org***

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