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Stigma Unaffected by Acceptance of Disease Model, Study Finds

September 21, 2010

Research Summary

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Survey results show that although more Americans now believe that mental illness and alcohol dependency are medical or genetic in origin than did so in the mid-1990s, they are just as likely to reject those who suffer from them, [HealthDay News](#) reported Sept. 14.

Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, public health advocates promoted the view that mental illness and substance abuse are rooted in neurobiology. Researchers from Indiana University and Columbia University decided to test whether these efforts had changed public perception, support for treatment, and attitudes about people living with disorders.

The researchers compared responses of American adults to surveys given in 1996 and 2006. Participants were asked to listen to short vignettes describing individuals suffering from major depression, alcohol dependence, and schizophrenia, and then answer questions.

While 54 percent of respondents believed that major depression had neurobiological causes in 1996, 67 percent believed that a decade later. The proportion who supported treatment for depression, schizophrenia, and alcohol dependence also increased over the same period. While 61 percent supported psychiatric treatment for alcohol dependence in 1996, 79 percent did so in 2006, and the percentage supporting it for major depression jumped from 75 percent to 85 percent.

Those who believed that the disorders were diseases were more likely to support treatment, but stigma did not decrease. "Where associated, the effect was to increase, not decrease, community rejection," the authors wrote.

The research team recommended that advocates and treatment providers rethink their approach to reducing stigma. Bernice Pescosolido, the Indiana University sociologist who led the research, said that future efforts should emphasize the person and his or her abilities instead of the disease.

The study appeared online in the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) on Sept. 15, 2010.

This article [summarizes](#) an external report or press release on research published in a scientific journal. When available, links to the sources are provided above.

COMMENTS ON THIS ARTICLE:

Posted by **Rick Esterly** on 22 Sep 10 08:50 AM CDT

Although the research is enlightening, experience teaches me that although reducing stigma in the community is very important, the

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impact of the disease model on reducing stigma is more important to the patient ... to understand that I am not a bad person for what I have done but I have a treatable disorder and I can recover.

*Posted by **John French** on 22 Sep 10 08:53 AM CDT*

I hope the surveys and the subsequent study dealt with the tension between the widespread belief in Free Will and the disease concept. Free Will says -- ok, you have a disease but you have the power to control it. It is understandable that many people will accept that alcoholism is a disease, but they also believe that once recognized, it can be restrained. This flies in the face of evidence, which shows that no one, whether doctors (as the article suggests) or A.A., is very successful at arresting the condition, whether you call it a disease or not.

*Posted by **Tracie Sheldrake** on 22 Sep 10 09:16 AM CDT*

No matter the stigma of any mental health disorder, I find that the majority of those I deal with accept their condition, and choose to turn their lives around.

*Posted by **Joshua** on 22 Sep 10 10:16 AM CDT*

the stigma associated with alcohol dependence will never go away, no matter how many people are convinced that it is a disease. the reason why is because everyone can see the damage that alcoholism does to people who have it, their families, and their communities. and everyone knows how to cure it. (your body can metabolize the alcohol in a couple of hours, after that don't put new alcohol in) if AIDS and Cancer could be cured by simply deciding not to have them anymore, all of the sympathy people have for victims of those diseases would dry up immediately.

*Posted by **drbill** on 22 Sep 10 10:45 AM CDT*

Mr. French points to a vast difference between depression and alcoholism. Today, depressed patients do not languish in endless talking therapies. We have medical treatments that drastically increase the effectiveness of group and/or cognitive therapy for the mental and emotional consequences of biological depression. Today, stigma is a positive force prompting depressed patients to get help. Biological treatments for the relapses and cravings of alcoholism hold out similar hope for alcoholics. But the development of effective medication is in its infancy - about where we were with affective disorders 40 years ago. Even today, over 90% of alcoholics never have a trial of blocking agents in combination with biological treatments for the physiologic panic, seizure disorders and depression that inevitably accompany alcoholism - and compromise the effectiveness of self-help and cognitive treatments for the emotional and spiritual components of the disease. Hopefully, Join Together can help change that situation.

*Posted by **Erik** on 22 Sep 10 11:07 AM CDT*

The stigma surrounding mental health and substance use may be more rooted in cultural and societal beliefs of what is right and healthy. The idea that people could be incredibly sick and disturbed is a thought that threatens the cultural norms.

*Posted by **R. Brinn** on 22 Sep 10 06:44 PM CDT*

Putting addiction treatment in a "white lab coat" aimed at bringing more federal dollars to SAMHSA by reducing the Criminal Justice stigma associated with addicts. Stigma remains a more damaging issue than recovery. With stigma, addicts are forever marginalized economically, socially and politically.

*Posted by **agrippa** on 22 Sep 10 10:04 PM CDT*

I do not think that the stigma will go away until clear and convincing evidence of a physical cause is found. Inertia is a problem, and it will take more than we have now to dispell the stigma

Posted by **R.Brinn** on 23 Sep 10 04:52 PM CDT

Stigma is Insult added to Injury... The injury is the amoral promotion of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (licit and illicit)...the Injury is stigmatizing the addicted and HIV/AIDS victims of this global plague...

Posted by **Gail Ward** on 27 Sep 10 01:17 PM CDT

2 things; it's important to believe in the seriousness of AODA as a disease, the chronic nature of it, and and it's neurobiologic origins. It is equally important not to give up hope of recovery. We can do this by using what is already known about the illness biologically and encourage the use and further development of psychotropic and anticraving meds, family and patient education etc. And we can build on what we know about social/behavioral therapies, the importance of being connected to an actively recovering community, and the importance of spiritual health and AODA. Spirituality is different for different people, but the need for incorporating that human need into recovery is the same in all of us. It's hard not to give up at times, but it's very important not to give up. All tough diseases were at one time considered "incurable", but cures, therapies, and effective treatments were eventually found, used, and healing did take place.

Posted by **Shattah206** on 27 Sep 10 01:21 PM CDT

It isn't so much the disease, but the behavior associated with the disease that is stigmatized. If cancer patients commonly broke into cars and stole credit cards to maintain their disease, you'd see a lot less sympathy for them also.

Posted by **mfmcgins** on 27 Sep 10 01:30 PM CDT

I suspect that the larger issue is understanding. The general public has heard about this as a disease for decades from credible trusted sources such as medical personnel, public figures, teachers, etc. Most of these were incidental public service messages or brief exchanges with dramatic stories. The public likes simple cause and effect and substance abuse doesn't have a 30 second sound bite that solves the whys and wherefores. Our language is irreconcilably negative, describing something most people believe happens because it was allowed to happen by the individual. This is further complicated by the ambivalent understanding of healthy use of alcohol or other drugs. I've been the field for the last 37 years and little has ultimately changed in these areas.

Posted by **Jane** on 27 Sep 10 04:03 PM CDT

I agree with Shattah206 that it is the behavior of addicts that causes the stigma. People may believe it is a disease, but they still believe there is an element of choice. Unlike physical diseases, addiction keeps people from rational thinking. Addicts need to want to change first, believe they can change, but even then, actually changing is difficult for them. At the same time, they need to be held accountable. Prevention would be so much easier than managing the disease of addiction as well as the side effects of ATOD; society has an interest in reducing ATOD use for that reason.

Posted by **Barry Schechter PhD LCSW-R** on 27 Sep 10 08:07 PM CDT

I am curious why this would surprise anyone that has come far enough to read Join Together. I have been a methadone advocate for many years. In 1996, Narcotics Anonymous, supposedly a 12 step program, that follows the twelve steps and 12 traditions of AA, put out a bulletin, that, "While we understand and empathize with those people trying to recover from opiate addiction that are taking medication, we welcome you to the meeting, but would appreciate if you just listened and did not share." That is a paraphrase, and the bulletin might have been issued in 1994, I don't recall. However, if the community at large stigmatizes opiate dependent people, the professional level, does the same, and even the 12 steppers of NA stigmatize, what do you think the patients feel? STIGMA. Please

read the book with the same name, by Goffman. If we want to treat addiction like a disease, that will not happen until it is taken out of the criminal justice hands, and put into the people;s hands that know how to treat addiction. If your house was being robbed, would you call a doctor? If uou are trying to recover from a disease, do you call a cop? Think about it folks. It is not really rocket science. If you want the cartels to go away, Legalize Drugs, All Drugs. Then at least dosages would be measured, cost could go down, profits could go to treatment. All of the interdiction monies could go to treatment. All of the prison monies could go to treatment. Let the criminal justice system fight crime. Let the professionals treat disease.

*Posted by **billinsandiego** on 28 Sep 10 10:19 AM CDT*
Advocacy for the disease concept has, since its beginning, primarily sought to change the attitude of the public and medical professions toward those afflicted by addiction and/or mental illness. It has failed because the effort is flawed. The reason the public (and in most cases physicians and other medical professionals) remain apathetic to addicts is not because of who the addict is or what he or she does, but how the addicted or mentally ill person affects them. There is more to human interaction than objective intellectual understanding. Addicts and those who suffer mental illness cause hurt, intentional or not, to those about them. The disease concept may provide a reason for behavior, but it doesn't mitigate the emotional pain and scarring caused by the actions of the afflicted.

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