



# Stigmas Surrounding Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)

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# Disclosures

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Employed by Mountain-Pacific Quality Health

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# What is stigma?

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Definition: a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person



Synonyms for stigma



Self-stigma versus public stigma



# Ryan White: An Example of Stigma

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- One of the first children in the United States diagnosed with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)
- Prior to diagnosis, AIDS was thought to only affect homosexual men
- Born with hemophilia, AIDS was transmitted via blood transfusion
- Battle through the court system necessary to attend his public school

# AIDS Stigma and Perceptions

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## In 1985...

- 80% of Americans said it was “probably true” most people with AIDS were homosexual men.
- 44% of Americans avoided places where homosexuals may be present to avoid contracting AIDS.

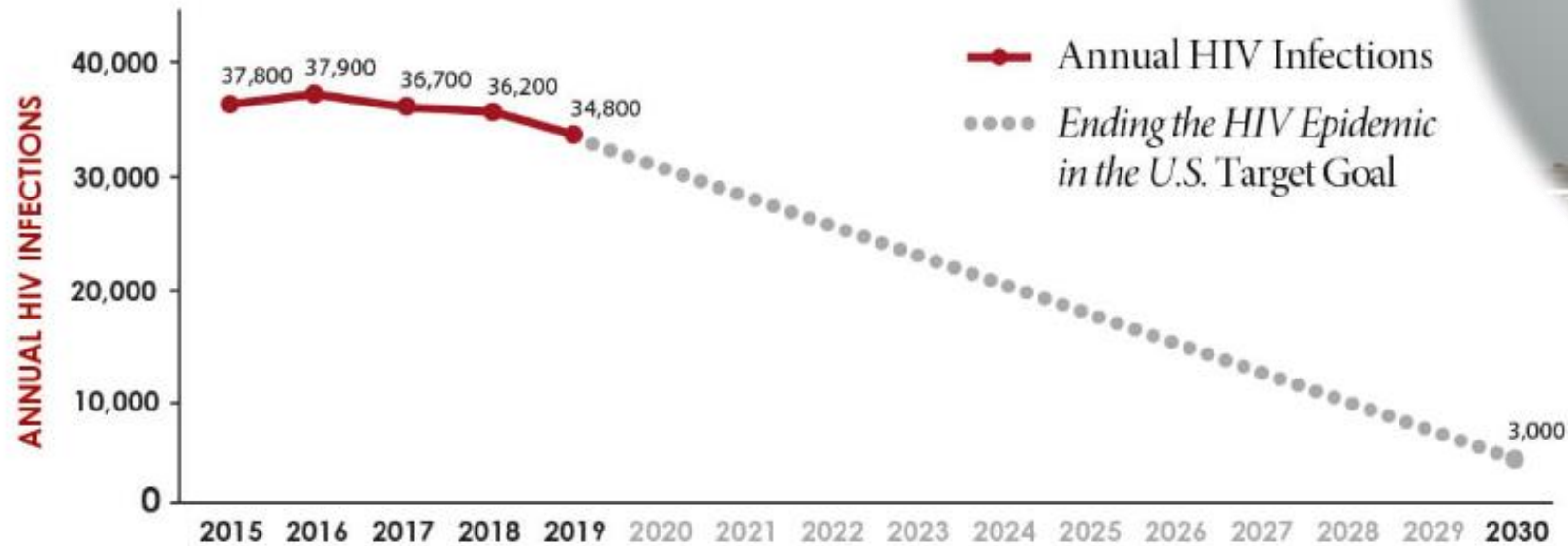
## In 1987...

- 51% of Americans agreed it was people’s own fault if they got AIDS.
- 44% of Americans believed AIDS might be God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior.

# Knowledge is power.

**NEW HIV INFECTIONS FELL 8% FROM 2015 TO 2019,  
AFTER A PERIOD OF GENERAL STABILITY**

**ANNUAL HIV INFECTIONS IN THE U.S., 2015-2019**



For more information, visit  
[cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom](https://cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom)



U.S. Department of  
Health and Human Services  
Center for Disease  
Control and Prevention



# Factors Leading to OUD

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1. “Treat pain as the fifth vital sign”
2. No “ceiling dose”
3. Pseudo-addiction
4. Not addictive for those with “true pain”

# Factors Leading to OUD Stigma

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1. “Just Say No” campaign
2. Criminalization
3. “Mind over matter”





# OUD and Associated Statistics

- In the United States, 2.7 million people suffer from OUD.
- There were 80,816 overdose-related deaths from opioids in 2021.
- Alaska saw the largest increase in overdose deaths, with an increase of 75.3% in 2021.

DRUG TYPE	(DEATHS 2021)	(DEATHS 2020)
Synthetic Opioids (fentanyl)	71,238	57,834
Psychostimulants (meth)	32,856	24,576
Cocaine	24,538	19,927
Natural/semi-synthetic (prescription)	13,503	13,722

# Stigma: A Barrier to Treatment

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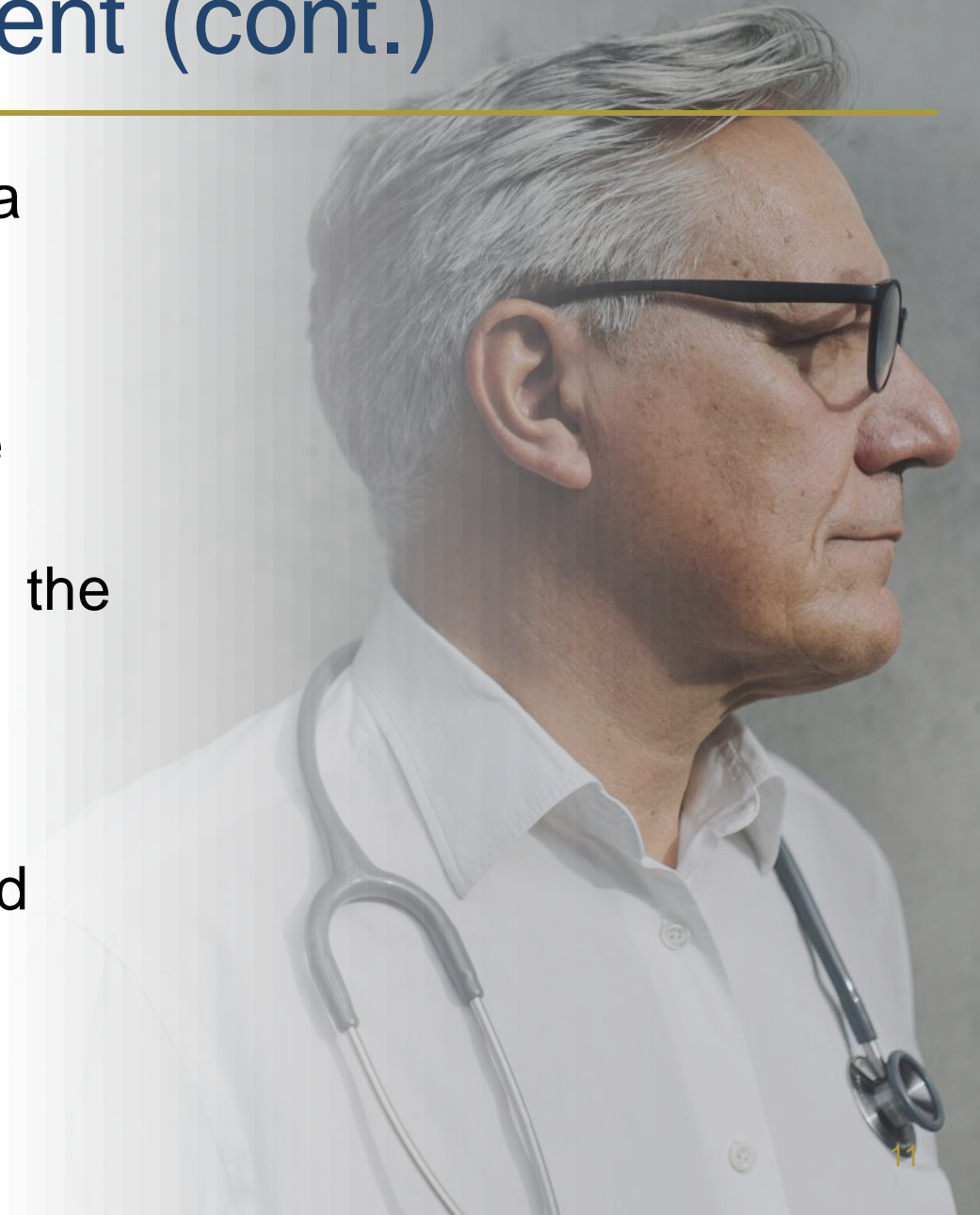


1. Only 1 in 4 people with OUD will seek treatment.
2. Stigma surrounding OUD impedes access to treatment and effects care delivery.
3. Stigma contributes to the disorder on an individual level.
4. Stigma surrounding other diseases differs from OUD stigma.
5. A commonly held false belief is that will power should be enough to stop drug use.

# Stigma: a Barrier to Treatment (cont.)

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6. Resistance in believing the addiction is a disease.
7. “Stigma plays an even larger role in this crisis, when internalized, stigma and the painful isolation it produces encourage further drug taking, directly exacerbating the disease.”  
-Dr. Nora Volkow, Director  
National Institute on Drug Abuse
8. Shame leads to mistrust of providers and avoidance of health care.



# Stigma is deadly.

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**“The shame and secrecy is just as deadly as the disease itself.”**

-Kristen Johnson, Anonymous People

# Overdose Death Disparities

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- Disfavoring a specific population group leads to stigma.
- Disproportionately higher for Native Americans, Alaska Natives and African Americans
- Other higher-risk factors for an overdose:
  - Men
  - Low income
  - Recent release from incarceration

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, July 2019: increase in overdose deaths from 2019 to 2020

- 22% increase in White Americans
- 39% increase in Native American and Alaska Natives
- 44% increase in African Americans

# Age Disparities

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- Data is conflicting and ever-changing
- Concerns in older age group (age 65 years or older):
  - Chronic conditions
  - Polypharmacy
  - Need for prescribed opioids increases with age
  - Decline in cognitive function
- Concerns in younger age group (12-25 years old)
  - Engage in higher-risk behaviors
  - More likely to believe they are invincible
  - Trust their friends completely



# Disparities in Receiving Treatment

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- State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS) Data-2019-2020
- 25 states and the District of Columbia
- Deaths in Black males 7x higher than non-Hispanic white males
- 16.4% of non-Hispanics had received treatment compared to only 8.3% of African Americans and 10.7% of Native Americans





# Potential Causes of Disparities

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- Secondary effects of income inequality
- Health care disparities
- Insufficient resources
- Lack of support networks
- Intergenerational trauma, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental health, etc.
- Discrimination



# Ways to Decrease Stigma

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- Treat people with **OUD** as you would those with **diabetes**
- Avoid **stigmatizing** language
- Use **harm reduction strategies**
- Recognize and remove **unconscious bias**
- Foster a **judgement free environment**
- Initiate **conversations**
- **Educate** people around you



# Decrease Treatment Stigma

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- Treat **suboxone** and **methadone** as you would **insulin**.
- The need to **avoid physical withdrawal** is often what leads to relapse.
- The benefit of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) comes from medicating the physical withdrawal symptoms, curbing the cravings and **allowing the patients time and space to work on what facilitated the addiction**.

# Holistic Approach

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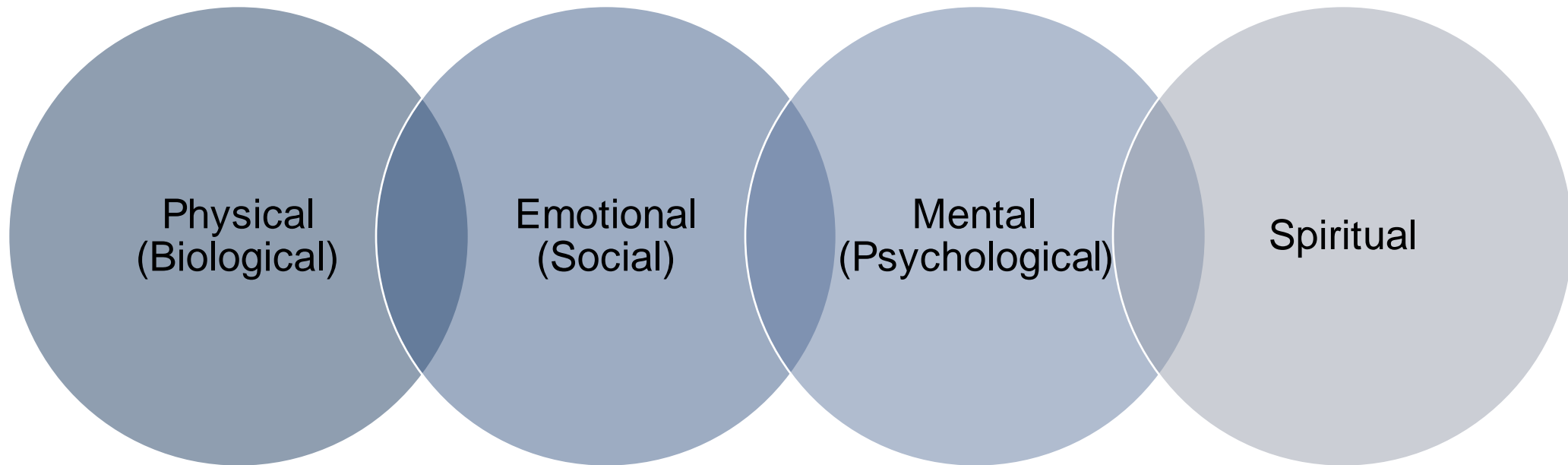
“We think of addiction as a brain disease, and that is a great way to reduce stigma and help people get the treatment they need. But putting the brain at the center of everything is a narrow way of thinking. **We need a more holistic approach that goes beyond a person’s biology.** We **MUST** integrate culture, societal factors and even spirituality, when appropriate, into mainstream medical institutions and education.”

-Kamilla Venner, PhD assistant professor, Department of Psychology at University of New Mexico and member of the Ahtna Athabascan Tribe

# National Institutes of Health (NIH) Helping to End Addiction Long-Term (HEAL) Initiative

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How to integrate MAT with the healing traditions of American Indian and Alaska Native communities.



# Successful Programs and Tools

- Wellbriety Training Institute®
- Use both Western (visualize as a ladder) and Indigenous worldviews (visualize as a circle)
- “Recovery is a Process not an Event”  
-Wellbriety Institute®
- Talking Circles
  - Validate individual thoughts, feelings and opinions
  - For those taught not to trust, talk or feel, this experience can be healing in itself
- Create a “Healing Forest”®



# The Healing Forest Model ®

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“The idea is that a forest, like a community, is only as healthy as its roots and environment. Unless individuals, families and communities are provided with a means of overcoming the impact of the unhealthy, dysfunctional root system (anger, guilt, shame and fear), they will find themselves participating in unhealthy behaviors.”

-The Wellbriety Training Institute®

# Didgwálič Wellness Center

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- Swinomish Tribe's Didgwálič Wellness Center reduced overdose among tribal members by 50% in one year
- Mission: Remove barriers to treatment in order to treat the “whole person”
- Everything under one roof
- Decrease stigma
- Free transportation
- Social work
- Childcare
- Group and individual meetings
- Transitional housing

# OUD Documentaries and Resources

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1. The Anonymous People
2. The Hungry Heart
3. In Plain Sight
4. OUD - A Guide for Stigma Reduction Efforts
5. National Institutes of Health - Helping to End Addiction Long-Term<sup>®</sup> initiative (NIH-HEAL Initiative)
6. How to Facilitate Wellbriety Training Institute Programs Guide by Wellbriety Training Institute<sup>®</sup>
7. How to conduct talking circles: <http://youtu.be/3RdIX7UM4ks>
8. Information on the Digwalic Clinic: <https://www.didgwalic.com/>





**“LOVE and COMPASSION  
are NECESSITIES, not  
luxuries. Without them,  
humanity cannot survive.”**

**-Gwalwa Rinpoche, fourteenth Dalai Lama**

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# Questions?

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# Thank you

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