

Introduction

Canadian families continue to be significantly affected by the current crisis surrounding substance use in our country. The province of Alberta has seen nearly 2 deaths per day from an apparent accidental drug poisoning from fentanylⁱ while on a national scale, just under 4000 Canadians died in 2017 from an apparent opioid-related death.ⁱⁱ While recent attention has focused on the use of opioids (e.g. fentanyl, morphine, heroin, etc.), we know that substance use problems are complex and multi-faceted and may include problems managing the use of other types of drugs such as alcohol, benzodiazepines or stimulants (e.g. crystal meth and cocaine). For some people, mental illness is a contributing factor to their substance use as research shows that people who struggle with substance use are up to 3 times more likely to be coping with a mental illness.ⁱⁱⁱ

Stigma continues to be a harsh reality faced by those who use substances; they may face outright discrimination or stereotyping or feelings of isolation or a sense of being judged.^{iv} Stigma is often a barrier for people and families who are seeking support for substance use problems. Changing the language we use when writing and speaking about substance use and people who use drugs is an important first-step for challenging stigma, but change must extend beyond words, to address the root causes of stigma that are entrenched in our beliefs, policies and practices in regards to substance use.

In Canada and beyond, many parents and family members whose children have died because of substance use are speaking out to challenge stigma as well as calling for a human rights and public health approach to policies addressing legal and illegal drugs. As advocates, parents are challenging decision-makers to implement new prevention, treatment and harm reduction interventions and services. Harm reduction measures aim to keep people who use drugs safer and healthier without requiring cessation or reduction in use.^v Examples of harm reduction methods include supervised consumption services, community distribution of naloxone, distribution of safe injection supplies and drug checking services. Most importantly, harm reduction is a care philosophy based on *“meeting people where they are at”* and supporting and empowering people who use substances to access supports, recognizing that the health care system can be a source of a stigma and discrimination when someone uses substances.^{vi}

#SeeTheLives Video Series

#SeeTheLives is a series of four short videos which feature 3 parents whose child’s death was related to substance use and 1 parent who has lost a child to suicide. By reading very personal letters written to their children, these four parents share intimate stories about their loved ones, express their experiences with stigma, and offer insights into what needs to change to address substance use and mental health.

Developed in partnership between parent advocates and university researchers, the goal of this project is to evoke understanding and challenge the stigma of substance use in Alberta, by showing the family experience of grief and loss connected to substance use; that we need to ‘see the lives’ beyond the numbers and statistics we see reported in the news to understand the impact of stigma on our families and communities. By using digital video to create and share messages and stories from parents and family members who are community advocates for anti-stigma, harm reduction and mental health, we hope to provoke people to see beyond the stereotypes about people who use drugs. In the words of parent and community advocates, people are much more than their substance use and ‘everyone is somebody’s someone’.

Discussion Questions

In creating this video project we wanted to stimulate conversation and allow people to discuss and reflect upon how and why stigma exists around substance use and what can be done to challenge stigma in the future. Below are a list of questions that may be useful in facilitating discussion.

General Questions

What thoughts and emotions were brought to the forefront for you in watching this video?

Did anything in particular stand out for you in watching this video?

What questions came to mind for you while watching this video?

What did you like or not like about this video? Did anything make you uncomfortable?

From Kym's video, what emotions were expressed when describing her grief as a parent?

Stigma

What is stigma and why does it occur?

How might labels such as 'addict' or 'criminal' make people feel if they are struggling with substance use?

What are other examples of stigma shown towards people who use substances and/or live with mental illness?

What is the impact of stigma for those who experience it and for their families or friends?

What challenges exist in trying to fight stigma? What suggestions do you have for combating stigma?

From Donna's video, what do you think kept her brother from reaching out for help?

Substance Use

What are some reasons for why people use substances?

Why might some people not be able to stop using substances?

Are there circumstances beyond the individual that contribute to substance use?

How can we as families and communities better support people who may be struggling with substance use?

Connecting Substance Use and Mental Illness

How are substance use and mental illness connected?

Why do you think people with mental illness are more likely to experience problems with substance use?

From Phil's video, what is meant by using drugs as a way to cope or 'self-medicate'?

Harm Reduction

What does harm reduction mean to you?

What are some of the different perspectives you have heard about harm reduction?

What are some challenges to implementing harm reduction in our communities?

What is meant by 'a poisoned drug supply' and how do 'safe supply' programs and policies address this?

From Petra's video, what are some examples of harm reduction that she describes?

Drug use has been shamed and silenced for too long.

We won't stay quiet. We won't be ashamed.

#SeeTheLives

See-Beyond.ca

About Us

#SeeTheLives was created and produced in 2018 through a partnership between university researchers from the School of Public Health, University of Alberta, the School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, the O'Brien Institute for Public Health, University of Calgary, and the leaders of Moms Stop the Harm and mumsDU, two prominent Canadian parent advocacy organizations representing families who have been impacted by substance use. Video production and creative services for the project were provided by Hoopla Media in Edmonton, Alberta.

In 2017, our team conducted interviews with 43 mothers whose children have died from causes related to substance use across Canada, detailing their experiences with bereavement and their subsequent drug policy advocacy. The stories we heard around the experience of stigma by mothers and their children who have passed away have informed the development of this video series. #SeeTheLives was funded by the **Alberta Opioid Response, Public Awareness Grants for Communities, Alberta Ministry of Health**.

References

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- iii. Rush et al. (2008). Prevalence of co-occurring substance use and other mental disorders in the Canadian population. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 53: 800-9. [LINK](#)
- iv. Government of Canada (2018). Stigma. [LINK](#)
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- v. Addiction Recovery and Community Health (ARCH - Royal Alexandra Hospital): Implementation Manual [LINK](#)