

Alcohol and stigma toolkit



BARNSELEY
Metropolitan Borough Council

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Words matter: How language choice can reduce stigma

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace or shame, a stain or blame, on a person's reputation.

When problematic, alcohol use can carry a high burden of stigma. The fear of judgment means people experiencing problems with their drinking are less likely to seek help. They are also more likely to drop out of treatment programs in which they voluntarily engage.

We are all in a position to reduce the stigma surrounding alcohol use. The language we use to discuss those experiencing problems formally as part of prevention messaging or informally with friends and family in conversations with colleagues and stakeholders can either increase or decrease the stigma attached to alcohol.

In the context of the growing alcohol-related harm, the language we use becomes particularly important. This is because we work in partnership with people or support family and friends who experience problems and directly confront the multiple societal stigmas associated with alcohol consumption.

Two main factors affect the burden of the stigma placed on a particular problem or disorder: perceived control that a person has over the condition and perceived fault in acquiring the condition.

When we believe a person has acquired their problem through no fault of their own, we typically attach no stigma to either the person or the problem. The same occurs when we believe the person has little control over the issue. Consider hard-to-treat cancers, for example.



By contrast, many people mistakenly believe mental health conditions, including problematic alcohol use, are within a person's control and partially their fault. For these reasons, they frequently attach more stigmas to them. The potential for stigma is greater still when some people in society are consuming more alcohol than they should, when their behaviours become problematic or when it is perceived to impact other people.

You can reduce stigma and help save lives just by changing your language.

Person-first language is proven to reduce stigma and improve outcomes for people who experience problems with alcohol. Person-first language doesn't define a person based on any medical disorder they may have. It's non-judgmental and neutral. So, what person-first language should we use to talk about alcohol?

Words to avoid	Words to use
Addict	Person with substance use disorder
Alcoholic	Person with alcohol problems
Clean	Person with alcohol problems
Dirty	Person with alcohol problems
Former/reformed addict/alcoholic	Person in recovery, person in long-term recovery

By using person-first language like this, we can make great progress toward reducing the deadly stigma associated with alcohol.



Family, alcohol and stigma

Stigma happens when we project stereotypes and prejudice in a discriminatory way.

People are often afraid of telling others or their own family they have an alcohol problem or dependency because they're scared of the reaction they will receive, such as:

- Being dismissed as 'bad parents' or children coming from 'bad families'
- A sense of shame being cast about the problem
- Being defined by the 'alcoholic' label

People who have problems with alcohol or are alcohol dependent can become victims of discrimination, like being actively ignored or avoided, or dehumanised in some other way, even when seeking help.

Indeed, parents who don't feel stigmatised about their drinking behaviours are more likely to seek support for their own needs.

The language we use is important, and we should avoid terms that label or blame people.

Whether it's at a birthday party, other social events or a celebratory time of year, like Christmas, many of us can feel pressured to drink alcohol by family or friends.

Ironically, there's a social stigma attached to not drinking, which can lead to thoughts like:

**“
I'll feel left out.**

**“
They'll think I'm boring.**

**“
I won't have as much fun.**

**“
How do I say I don't
want a drink?**

**“
If I say no, will others
think I have a drinking
problem?**



But you don't need to drink alcohol to have a good time, and you shouldn't worry about what others may think.

You can challenge this stigma, as it's okay not to drink, and talk openly about issues surrounding alcohol. You can still enjoy yourself, even if it means drinking less or not at all.

We know that alcohol can impact families in many ways, and the stigma attached to admitting there is a problem within the family can prevent people from accessing support, but this needn't be the case.

It takes great courage to access the support available, and you won't be alone as you start the road to recovery.

You shouldn't feel shame admitting you have a problem with alcohol or alcohol dependency. These are health issues, not crimes, and plenty of support is available for you and your family.



Work life, alcohol and stigma

Stigma at work varies from discriminatory hiring practices to excluding or marginalising people. These actions can be a barrier preventing those with an alcohol problem from seeking support.

Providing the same allowances for staff experiencing alcohol or drug-related issues as those with other health-related conditions or challenging personal circumstances is one way to reduce and challenge alcohol and drug-related stigma at work.

While alcohol is often the subject of informal conversations at work, throwaway comments of “alcoholic” or “drunk” can be degrading and keep struggling colleagues silent.

It may be a joke made with no ill intentions, but this kind of conversation, coupled with daily work-related stressors, contribute to why people choose to stay silent about personal issues with alcohol or delay accessing support.

It can also impact people’s social relations, their mental and physical health and trigger dangerous behaviours at work or even further use.

The workplace itself can be a factor in encouraging increased levels of drinking. Research shows that employees in industries like construction, hospitality, utilities and wholesale are more likely to become heavy or dependent drinkers.

On average, however, consumption is often higher among people in managerial and professional roles compared to lower-paid occupations.

Feeling stigmatised at work is a barrier to seeking support. Some people may feel they can't talk openly about their issues with alcohol through fear of losing their job or damaging their reputation. Feeling stigmatised at work often prevents people from seeking support.

However, talking openly and honestly with employers, other employees or managers about any problems you may have helps challenge stigma.



Older people, alcohol and stigma

Alcohol is the most used substance among older adults, but stigmatisation can lead to issues with alcohol being hidden until a crisis point is reached.

Imagine being in a place where you can't let anyone know about the struggles and fears you face daily, like being shunned by friends or given an unfair label that changes how people view you.

Now imagine being reluctant to speak to your family, friends or doctor about having a problem with alcohol. These problems are less likely to be detected in older people as they're more likely to hide them due to the stigma of ageing and having a problem with alcohol.

Stigma manifests itself differently: being judged by others, being treated differently, or being stereotyped. However, most people who have a problem with alcohol don't fit the stereotypes of a problem drinker.

Changes caused by ageing make older people uniquely vulnerable to alcohol problems. These vulnerabilities include loneliness, diminished mobility, chronic pain, poor physical health and poor economic and social support.

Evidence suggests older drinkers are just as likely to benefit from support as younger drinkers, but embarrassment and barriers associated with mixed-age treatment services can deter them from seeking help.



Women, alcohol and stigma

Societal stigmas cause more of a stigma for women who seek help for issues with alcohol, which causes them to be treated differently than men.

While men often get a free pass for their alcohol consumption, women can be held to a different standard, particularly those with children.

This can lead to women hiding drinking behaviours and not accessing support, even when they know they have a problem. There can be lots of stresses throughout a woman's life which could lead to a reliance on or abuse of alcohol.

Those with children, for example, may not access support for alcohol due to the fear that their children may be taken away from them, which is not the case in the majority of families.

Evidence shows women often begin abusing alcohol to deal with the effects of work-related stresses or a crisis, like a divorce or losing a child. These issues can be difficult to discuss and may keep women from treatment.





Women who act as caregivers can often hide drinking behaviours, continuing as if nothing is wrong for as long as possible and not accessing support, even when they know they have a problem.

49% of people accessing the **DrinkCoach** digital alcohol intervention tool are female compared to just **30%** accessing face-to-face support from **Barnsley Recovery Steps**.

In addition, women who have spouses with alcohol use disorders may be victims of domestic abuse, which may prevent access to treatment. You can speak to IDAS (Independent Domestic Abuse Services) if you're concerned about your relationship.

Call **03000 110 110** or visit idas.org.uk/domestic-abuse.



Young people, alcohol and stigma

An estimated 1,317 children in Barnsley live with an adult who is alcohol dependent, but only 16% of these adults are known to treatment services.

Stigma and the concern that they won't be properly understood often stop families from seeking help and talking about their experiences of alcohol misuse. Parents and young people can be afraid of how they and their family will be perceived.

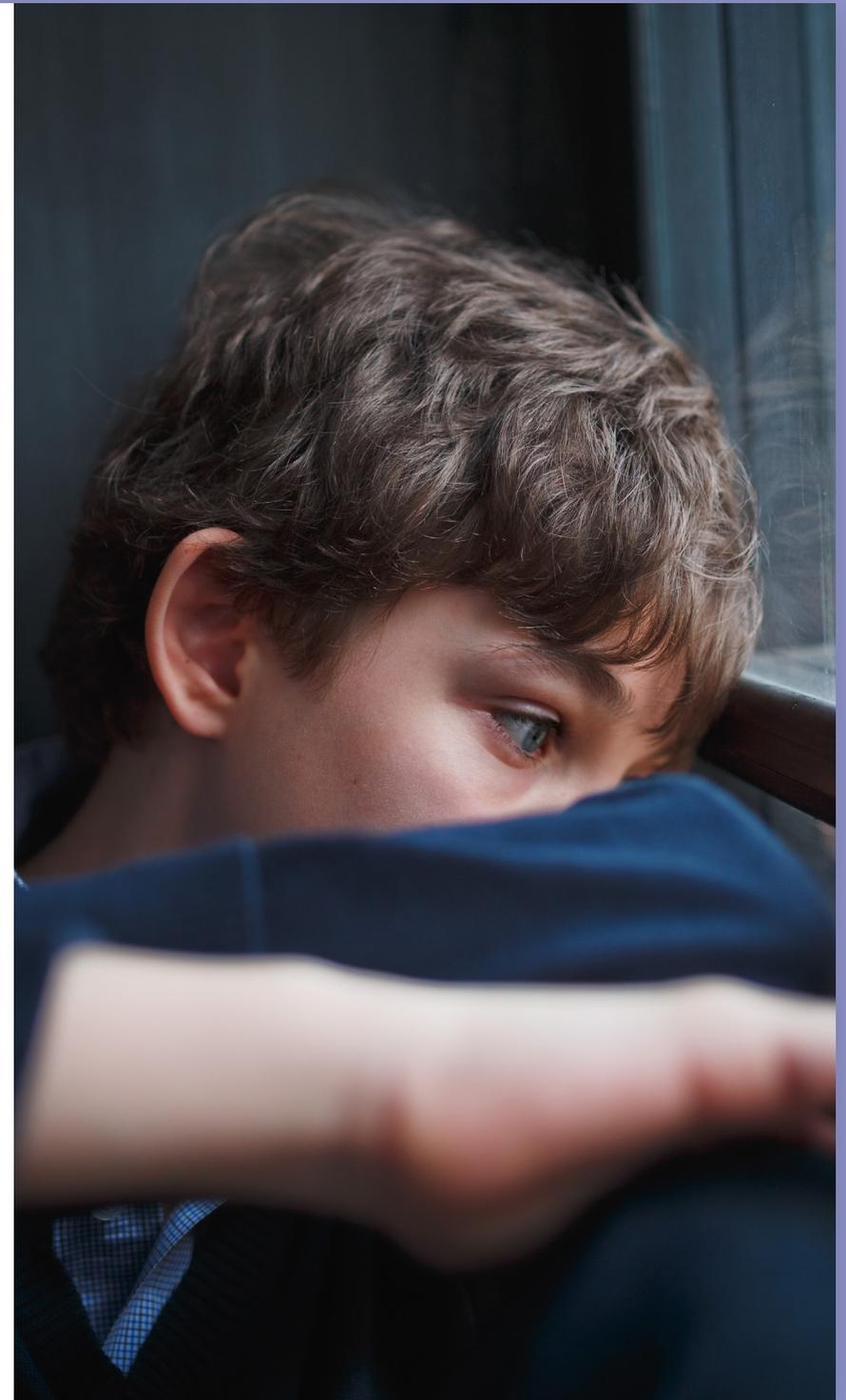
Families of alcohol users also experience stigma and need support too. The stigma can prevent children with parents who misuse alcohol from getting help.

On the other hand, young people can often be pressured into drinking alcohol by their peers, particularly in social settings; it's common for them to be shamed for turning down a drink and made to feel like they don't fit in.

While drinking alcohol is seen as something teenagers do as part of growing up or distracting themselves from life's pressures, it can be more damaging than we think.

It should be acceptable not to drink, and heavy drinking at an early age should not be dismissed as youthful rebellion - the reasons teenagers start drinking can be complicated and varied.

Young people who may be viewed as having a problem with alcohol are more likely to be considered weak than sick and needing treatment.





Problematic alcohol use is often more severely stigmatised than other mental illnesses.

People who misuse alcohol are often seen as weak rather than sick, and evidence shows this attitude makes young people less likely to seek help from peers, family, formal sources or even online.

The stigma associated with young people who misuse alcohol can lead to discrimination, social isolation and avoidance of professional treatment. Parents and young people can be afraid of how they and their family will be perceived.

Young people are more likely to seek support from their peers, but the stigma attached to drinking can lead to a young person not talking about it as they're afraid of being excluded or given unhelpful advice.

Reducing the stigma of alcohol misuse increases the likelihood of a young person seeking help from family members and alcohol services. Seeking help early is crucial in reducing the long-term effects of alcohol misuse.

Alcohol addiction is a health problem, not a crime, and families should be comfortable in coming forward to access treatment.

Families can play an important role in supporting a young person through the process and can help them access support from our Young People's Substances Misuse Service: call **01226 705 980** or email **YPSMS@barnsley.gov.uk**.





Support available

If you are an adult and you feel your drinking is increasing or that you're dependent on alcohol and need help to reduce your alcohol consumption or to stop completely, Barnsley Recovery Steps offer wraparound support for those who need it and their family too.

Visit www.humankindcharity.org.uk/service/barnsley-recovery-steps for more information about the help on offer.

If you can't access face-to-face support because of time constraints or any other discrimination or embarrassment you may face, you can take the [two-minute Alcohol Test](http://drinkcoach.org.uk/barnsley-alcohol-test) to see if you qualify for up to six free sessions with Drink Coach: drinkcoach.org.uk/barnsley-alcohol-test.



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