

Stigma & Cannabis



YMCA Youth Cannabis Awareness Program

Programme de sensibilisation des jeunes au cannabis du YMCA

Stigma refers to the negative attitudes, judgements and beliefs that motivate people to fear, reject, avoid and discriminate against others for any physical or social attribute they possess.¹

People that use cannabis may experience stigmatization from peers, family and caregivers based on stereotypes and misconceptions about cannabis. They may be judged or mistreated for their substance use without other aspects of their life being considered.



A person can be judged/stigmatized for a wide range of behaviors and characteristics, including but not limited to...

- Gender
- Financial status
- Race
- Sexual Orientation
- Mental Health
- Substance Use (including cannabis)



- Illness
- Weight
- Religion
- Age
- Interests
- Etc.

Stigma can be experienced at multiple levels²

Self Stigma

How a person feels about themselves. They may apply negative attitudes to themselves for a stigmatized characteristic, leading to reduced self-esteem.

Structural Stigma

When members of the general public disapprove of a person or group for characteristics, choices or qualities that they believe are unacceptable.

Social Stigma

Anticipated Stigma

Judgment or stereotyping experienced either by family or friends of a stigmatized person, or by a care provider that supports stigmatized individuals or groups.

Secondary Stigma

When professionals (counselors, doctors, teachers, law enforcement) or institutions create barriers to accessing necessary services which, in turn, affect a person's quality of life.

The Cycle of Cannabis Stigmatization³



Language Matters: Why We Say "Cannabis" Instead Of "Marijuana"

The word 'marijuana' was popularized in the 20th century by cannabis critics.⁴ They associated the term marijuana with impoverished, marginalized communities, as well as criminal activity and violence to provoke negative judgment and fear. This contributed to the stigmatization and illegalization of cannabis for nearly a century in Canada.⁵

Current legal framework has abandoned use of the word 'marijuana' due to its negative associations and correctly refers to the plant as cannabis in order to reduce the stigma surrounding its use.⁶



Legalization and Cannabis Stigma

Did legalizing cannabis change the way other people view cannabis use?

49.2% of people that did not smoke cannabis viewed doing so as acceptable in 2017.⁷

56% of people that did not smoke cannabis viewed doing so as acceptable in 2020.⁸

Half of Canadians that use cannabis do not feel comfortable publicly disclosing doing so.⁹

Decriminalization of cannabis comes from an evidence-based approach to policies to reduce harms created from...

- A Criminal Record**
2018 statistics reveal that 500,000 Canadians have a criminal record for cannabis possession. As a result, they face difficulties travelling abroad, volunteering in their community and finding meaningful employment. A criminal record for cannabis can also prevent a person from renting an apartment, purchasing a home or achieving a post-secondary education. It can also prevent the immigration or citizenship process.⁹
- Concerning Substance Use Trends**
The Cannabis Act was created with the intent of establishing a legal framework to prevent underage cannabis use. However, a criminal record for youth can prevent future success. Therefore, those found in violation of the act are now less likely to be charged, instead receiving fines, being required to enter diversion programs or having small quantities (less than 5 grams) of cannabis seized by police without criminal charge. The Government of Canada has also funded various evidence based education programs and initiatives to increase awareness of cannabis-related risks for young Canadians in effort to reduce harms.
- Stigma Preventing Help-Seeking**
Approximately 40% of Canadians overall report that stigma prevents them from seeking support for medical issues.¹⁰ Youth feeling stigmatized for cannabis use may isolate from those around them to avoid judgment, experience poorer mental health and create additional barriers to seeking help or support for problems in their life.¹¹

Impact of Stigma on Youth That Use Cannabis

Representation in Media
The media tends to portray drug use as distorted or exaggerated, focusing only on the most extreme cases in society. Marginalized or underprivileged people are portrayed negatively for cannabis use, often shown connected to criminal behavior, which furthers negative stereotypes of racial minorities.¹²

Using Cannabis to Cope with Stigmatization
Research suggests that cannabis can be used as a coping mechanism by youth in response to trauma and lack of support from family and peers.¹⁷ Marginalized youth (including those from lower-income families, LGBTQ+ or Indigenous youth) experience elevated rates of cannabis use, and also report higher rates of cannabis use than white, heterosexual youth and/or youth from higher-reported income families.⁸

Fear of Labeling Due To Cannabis Use
Youth that use continue to use cannabis into adulthood may be labelled as lazy, irresponsible or immature. Non-users may also fear being judged for having friends or family members that use cannabis. Friends or family of people that use cannabis may try to deny it is happening.¹²

Increased Risk of Social and Mental Health Issues
Youth that are stigmatized for cannabis use may feel ashamed and hopeless, experiencing increased risk of depression or anxiety. In Canada, 20% of youth experience a mental illness or mental health disorder.¹⁴ Stigma can contribute to negative social health. Youth affected by stigma due to their cannabis use may feel misunderstood by others, increasing feelings of isolation and causing difficulties with social relationships.¹⁶

How Can We Reduce Stigma?

- Be Empathetic and Ask Questions**
Being able to understand why people use cannabis helps us see them as a whole person and lowers judgment.
- Educate Yourself**
Use facts to support conversation to prevent misconceptions from clouding feelings, thoughts and actions towards people that use cannabis.
- Consider Any Personal Bias**
Reflect on your own opinions about substance use when speaking to others while respecting their values and decisions.

Language Matters

Stigmatizing Language	Preferred Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marijuana • Addict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannabis • Person with a substance use disorder
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stoner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person who consumes cannabis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug Habit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular substance use

Identify the person first, separate from the substance. This can encourage individuals to seek the help they need, can positively affect the quality of health services and influence policies surrounding treatment options and accessibility

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