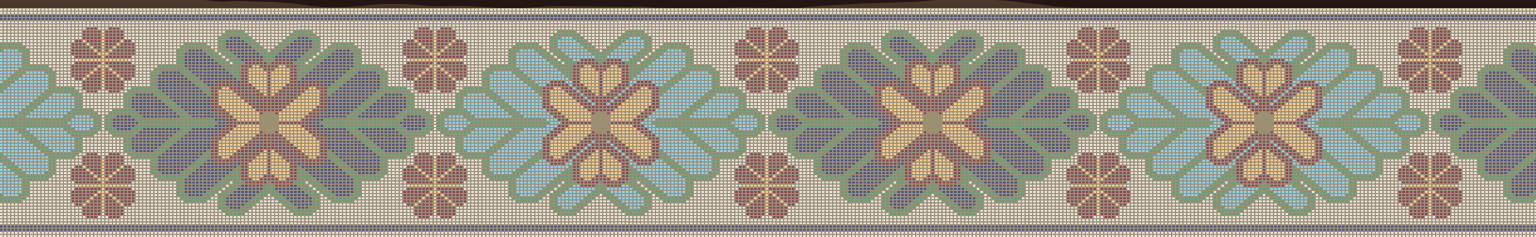


Stand up to Stigma.
Stand up *for Peace.*



Stigma is a public health crisis affecting First Nations individuals, families and communities.

Stand up to stigma to support healing, promote wellness, and reduce harm.

What is stigma?

Stigma is the expression of negative beliefs or attitudes about a person or group that leads to unfair treatment or harmful actions. This results in individuals being devalued or excluded. It also creates a divide between *us* and *them*, which contributes to poor social and health outcomes for stigmatized groups.

Stigma isolates people and blocks pathways to healing.

Standing up to stigma means choosing to care, rather than to judge. When we meet others with dignity and respect, we return to what the Creator intended: balance and wellness for First Nations individuals, families, and communities.



Stigma can be about:

- Drug use and addiction
- Recovery and treatments for addiction (e.g., opioid agonist therapy)
- Experiences of trauma (e.g., colonial trauma, sexual abuse, inter-partner violence)
- Mental illness
- The value of First Nations culture-based practices

Stigma continues the harms of colonization. By reinforcing colonial systems of power that affect how First Nations people see themselves and are treated within society, stigma harms the identity of individuals, families, and entire communities.

What does Stigma feel like?

Stigma can feel like a heavy burden and its weight can deeply impact a person's sense of balance. It can dull *Hope* towards a future. It can affect *Belonging* within one's culture and community. And it can cloud a sense of *Meaning* and *Purpose* in life.

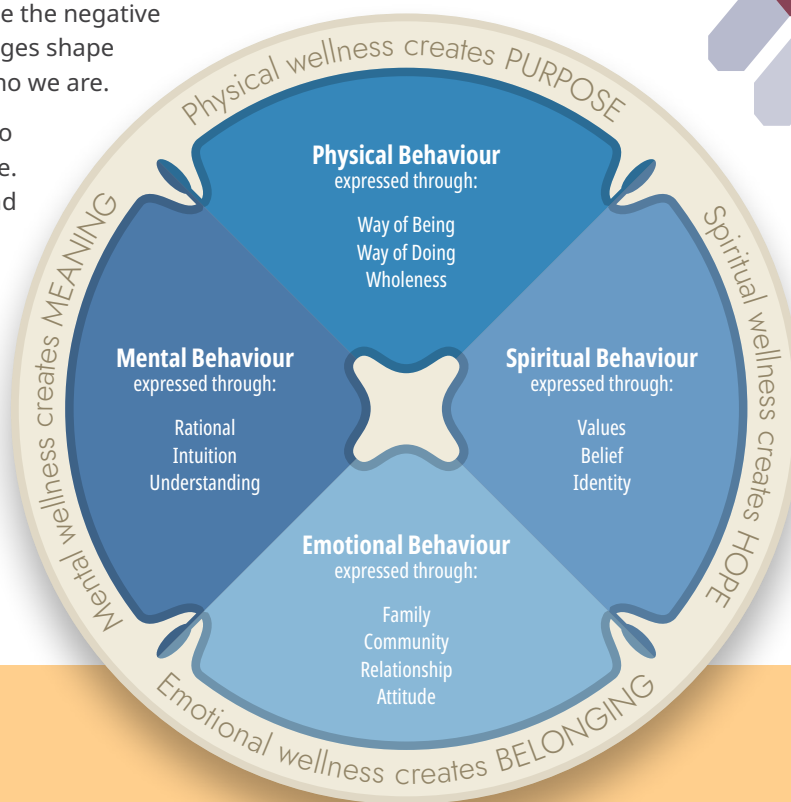
Self-stigma happens when we begin to internalize the negative judgments placed on us by others. These messages shape how we see ourselves and how we feel about who we are.

In trying to carry this burden, people may turn to coping strategies like self-harm or substance use. Stigma around substance use can create fear and shame that prevent people from reaching out and finding their path to wellness and balance.

It's important to remember that the weight of stigma is not yours to carry. It comes from the impacts of colonization, systemic racism, and the judgments of others. While it can affect your sense of Hope, Belonging, Meaning, and Purpose, you can reconnect with the wellness and balance that was gifted to you by the Creator.



Addressing stigma promotes the well-being of First Nations individuals, families and communities.



Challenging stigma means standing up for peace.

Stigma divides, isolates, and harms. It denies people of their dignity and *Belonging*. In contrast, peace-making in First Nations worldviews is about restoring balance, healing relationships, and nurturing harmony between people and with the land.

Peace is a gift from the Creator that is brought into action through **honesty, caring/sharing, strength** and **kindness**. Choosing the path of peace-making affirms that every person has a right to life, identity, and connection. By embracing our shared duty to care for one another, we can resist the harmful effects of stigma and help carry peace forward.

You can stand up to stigma by asking why you assume or judge certain things about others and yourself. Recognize that everyone walks a different path and no one's place in Creation is more or less important than another's.

To move away from stigma requires facing feelings like fear and shame with **curiosity**. Being curious helps us understand others better, builds empathy, and opens the door to healing and peace.



Four directions teaching, shared by Elder Peter O'Chiese of the O'Chiese First Nation in Alberta.



Shift stigma by growing your curiosity.

Ask yourself, “I wonder what would change if I...”

For example: Choose to see someone who uses substances as a person who could benefit from kindness and care.

What could this look like?

- Instead of looking away or avoiding eye contact, extend kindness through a greeting in your First Nations language.
- Offer food or provide information on how to get support.

These acts of kindness and care validate a person using substances as a relative of Creation.



Shifting beliefs about substance use and addiction saves lives.

STIGMATIZING BELIEF

People choose to be addicted.

PEACE-MAKING BELIEF (DESTIGMATIZING)

Addiction is a chronic illness that affects not only individuals, but also families and communities. It is shaped by social determinants of health that are influenced by colonization, systemic inequities, and trauma passed down through generations.

STIGMATIZING BELIEF

People who cannot stop using drugs are weak.

PEACE-MAKING BELIEF (DESTIGMATIZING)

People might use drugs to cope from the effects of stigma and complex trauma.

STIGMATIZING BELIEF

People who use drugs don't deserve support. Treatment is a one-shot deal.

PEACE-MAKING BELIEF (DESTIGMATIZING)

Recovery can be a long journey, and everyone deserves support, no matter how long it takes.

STIGMATIZING BELIEF

They were using, so that's on them.

PEACE-MAKING BELIEF (DESTIGMATIZING)

Addiction can affect anyone. Everyone has the right to life and deserves compassion.

Common Cultural Interventions

Feast for our Ancestors / Loved Ones who have Gone On
Medicine People / Traditional Practitioners

Use of Natural Foods / Medicines
Hunting / Fishing / Hide-Making

Grieving / Singing
Cleansing / Sweat Lodge Ceremony · Prayer · Singing
Social / Cultural Activities · Language

Land-based Activity

Dream Interpretation

Traditional Teachings / Education

Ceremonial Practice (unspecified)

Give-Away Dances / Ceremony

Use of Cultural Instruments

Elders

Dancing · Storytelling

Talking Circle · Tell Creation Story

Fasting Ceremony · Naming Ceremony

Ways to address substance use and reduce stigma:

- **Uphold the right of First Nations** to participate in their culture and identity, including persons who use substances. Cultural practices that can support a greater sense of peace, balance and wellness include: smudging, prayer, Talking Circles, connecting to land, and Elder guidance.
- **Value Indigenous Knowledge** and practices around healing and wellness as evidence based.¹
- **Offer wrap-around support** that addresses the whole person: spirit, heart, mind and body.²
- **Supply accurate information** about substance use and addiction.

Use peace-making language:

- **Use people-first language**, e.g., people who use opioids rather than *opioid user* or *addict*, or person living with addiction or problems with substance use rather than *junkie* or *abuser*.
- **Use language that promotes recovery** and focuses on strengths, e.g., person facing barriers to accessing services rather than *unmotivated* or *non-compliant*.
- **Avoid slang and shame-based language**, e.g., positive or negative test results rather than *dirty* or *clean* test results.

¹ Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. (2020). Indigenous wellness framework reference guide. National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation. Retrieved from: <https://www.thunderbirdpf.org/IWF>

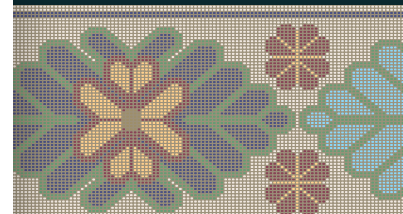
² Ibid. p. 4.

If you are living with the weight of stigma, know that your thoughts and feelings are valid.

Remember that

- **The Great Spirit gave you life.** Your spirit carries your identity. You have a place of *Belonging* on this land that we know as Turtle Island. Your life has *Meaning*, and you have *Purpose* in this world.
- Connecting to your culture can restore your balance and lead to healthy ways of coping. **Healing from the harms of stigma is possible.**
- The Creator gave First Nations people the gifts of peace, kindness, caring, honesty and strength. We all must nurture those gifts into expression.
- **Growing your wellness is possible.**

Check out Thunderbird's *Connecting with Culture* – *Growing Our Wellness: Activity Guide*





thunderbirdpf.org

