



HEPATITIS C LESSONS • PART 3

The Stigma of Hepatitis C: Bias and Prejudice

PURPOSE

Helping members of your group realize they are not at fault for getting hepatitis C. Letting your group know that people who don't have hepatitis C may be scared by it. Understanding that there may be a stigma, but that it can be overcome.

WHAT IS A STIGMA?

A social stigma is when people who don't know better think negatively about another group or another person.

When people think this way about others, they typically have a wrong view of that person or group.

More often than not, their notions are based on ignorance, or not knowing. Remind everyone in your group that how or why they got infected is not important. People outside the group may ask, but people in the group do not have to answer.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

What is a stigma?

Why does hepatitis C carry one?

What are the effects of a stigma?

How can you change your attitude to help reduce the sting of a stigma?

How can you educate others to break the stigma?

Do you feel like you deserve hepatitis C as a result of current or past behavior?

Handout: Is having hepatitis C something to be ashamed of?
Topics for thought and discussion
Tips for developing a healthy attitude

Here are some sample questions and answers you can use as you like during your meeting

Why does hepatitis C carry a stigma?

Any condition can be stigmatized from a lack of compassion, a lack of understanding, or fear. Many people are biased or prejudiced against things they don't understand.

Hepatitis C may carry a stigma for several reasons:

- ***Fear of catching the virus:*** Hepatitis C is contagious and can be spread to others through contact with blood. This alone may make some people avoid those who have the disease
- ***Fear of illness in general:*** Some people do not like to be around “sick” people, even if the “sick” person does not have an infectious disease, or one with noticeable symptoms
- ***Blame:*** No matter how you got hepatitis C, no one should be blamed
- ***Ignorance:*** Anyone can get infected with hepatitis C. While it is true that some people who have hepatitis C got it from sharing drug needles with someone who had hepatitis C, that could have been decades ago. Many other people were infected by blood from transfusions or improperly cleaned medical, tattooing, or piercing equipment

NOTES

Did you know your attitude can help reduce the sting of stigma?

How anyone was infected with hepatitis C is private. No one needs to tell another person. People with hepatitis C should not blame themselves for things

that happened in the past; instead, they should focus on what they need to do in the present. Doing something for your liver can be as simple as eating healthy food or taking a walk to get exercise.

Can educating others help break the stigma?

Stigma comes from ignorance and fear. Most people know very little about hepatitis C. They don't know how it spreads or how many people have it. Simply explaining these facts may be all you need to do to break through the stigma.

So, always be honest and factual about hepatitis C. Try not to criticize or blame others for their misunderstanding or lack of knowledge.

NOTES

Did you know some people may feel like hepatitis C is a punishment for current or past behavior?

Please remember that:

- *No one deserves hepatitis C*
- *It does not matter how anyone got hepatitis C*
- *Guilt and shame will not improve health. They waste energy—the very energy that people with hepatitis C need to fight the disease*

If anyone with the virus struggles with negative emotions, he or she should talk to a healthcare provider. Counseling is available. Seek professional help immediately if you have negative thoughts, such as thoughts about suicide or of hurting yourself.

Should you be ashamed of having hepatitis C?

No, you shouldn't. Being told that you have hepatitis C can be frightening. It is normal to feel overwhelmed, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. So don't punish yourself. You are still you; you are not the disease. But feeling this way is very understandable.

Realize that more than 3 million Americans have hepatitis C. That means people with all sorts of jobs—teachers,

firefighters, healthcare workers, lawyers—can and do have hepatitis C. You are not alone.

Take the time to read all you can about hepatitis C. The more you know, the better chance you have of making healthy decisions and living a healthy life. When you know the facts, you can help other people learn what's true and what's false about hepatitis C.

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Review Points

- *Do you believe that hepatitis C carries a stigma? Why do you think this is?*
- *Is there anything you can do to address the stigma of hepatitis C?*
- *Do you tell other people that you have hepatitis C? Who would you tell and why? Why would you not tell some people?*
- *Have you ever felt that other people are uncomfortable because they found out you have hepatitis C? If so, why do you think that is?*
- *Have you ever felt uncomfortable around other people who have an illness? If so, what makes you uncomfortable?*
- *When telling other people, have they felt uncomfortable and, if so, why? How might you help them to feel more comfortable?*
- *What are your feelings about having hepatitis C? Do you see yourself as a victim?*
- *Do you feel like you are “dirty,” or a risk to other people?*
- *Do you feel like your health and future have been ruined?*
- *Do you feel like you deserve hepatitis C because of something you did?*
- *What do you want others to know about your life with hepatitis C?*

Suggested Reading:

A Guide To Stigma and Hepatitis C

www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/Stigma_Guide.pdf

Adopting a healthy attitude

- *Focus on today, not the past. And think positively about a future, when you're cured and clear of the virus*
- *Get accurate information about hepatitis C from your healthcare provider or support group*
- *Be honest and realistic*
- *Accept your situation, but don't let it label you. Hepatitis C may be a part of your life, but that doesn't mean it should control your life*
- *Maintain your perspective on the big picture. Focus your attention on things that bring peace, joy, laughter, and meaning*
- *Be aware of the words you use. Say positive phrases. Instead of saying, "Hepatitis C is ruining my life," say, "I can find a way to live with hepatitis C." Or even better, "I can beat it"*
- *Learn what you can and cannot control. For example, you cannot control the fact that you got hepatitis C. You can control your attitude and what you say to yourself about having the virus. And, if you choose, you can control your commitment to defeating it*
- *In your mind, picture yourself in good health, not sick with hepatitis C. Look at your life in a more hopeful, positive way. Visualization is a powerful tool for changing the way you—and other people—see you. You're making a change for the better. Be proud of your accomplishments, and there will be many more to come*
- *Help others. Reaching out to those who are also struggling can be another way to help yourself.*

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