

## Experiences of stigma

### What is HIV stigma?

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Stigma means different things to different people.

One dictionary's definition is: "The shame or disgrace attached to something regarded as socially unacceptable."

There may be a feeling of 'us and them'. People who are stigmatised are marked out as being different and are blamed for that difference.

Many people have fears, prejudices or negative attitudes about HIV. Stigma can result in people living with HIV being insulted, rejected, gossiped about and excluded from social activities. At its extreme, stigma can drive people to physical violence.

People living with HIV often feel nervous about telling others that they have HIV due to the fear of stigma or discrimination. This can

lead to isolation and feeling unsupported, which can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing.

“Some people when they hear that someone’s HIV positive – especially us Africans – they’ll be seeing someone who’s dying, someone who is not supposed to touch anyone.”

Stigma, whether perceived or real, often fuels myths, misconceptions and choices, impacting people’s HIV education and awareness. It can result in people with HIV believing some of the things that other people say about HIV, even when these are not true.

Stigma is often attached to things people are afraid of. Ever since the first cases of AIDS in the early 1980s, people with HIV have been stigmatised. There are a number of reasons for this:

- If undiagnosed and unmanaged, HIV can still be a serious, life-threatening illness. There is a long history of illnesses being stigmatised – cancer and tuberculosis are two other examples.
- People who don’t understand how HIV is transmitted may be afraid of ‘catching’ it through social contact.
- Some people have strong views about sexual behaviour. They may think that there are situations in which sex is wrong or that certain people shouldn’t behave in particular ways.
- The way people think about HIV depends on the way they think about the social groups that are most affected by HIV. Some people already have negative feelings about women, gay men, immigrants, black people, people who use drugs and others.

Stigma leads to people not being treated with dignity and respect.

Stigma is one of the main reasons that some people end up having quite negative feelings about themselves in relation to their HIV diagnosis. **This is sometimes called self-stigma or internalised stigma; you can read more about this on another page.**

*“The way that people think about HIV it’s almost that you are assumed to have some sort of dirty lifestyle... It was assumed that I was either sleeping with hundreds of people unprotected or that I’d become a sex worker.”*

This page was last reviewed in February 2021. It is due for review in February 2024.

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