

## WHAT IS STIGMA?

Stigma is a powerful, complex social and cognitive process that leads to the discrediting, devaluing or excluding of a person or group of people based on a real or perceived difference.

Stigma, stereotyping, and bias related to alcohol use by women who are pregnant and those affected by FASDs harms the individual and creates barriers that hinder FASD prevention and care.

Stigma arises from patterns of behaving, thinking, and feeling about human differences, be it physical appearance, cultural or social identity, health condition, disability, age, or gender. These differences become negatively shaped by harmful cultural or personal beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes.

Stigma is enacted through labeling, social exclusion, prejudice, differential treatment and discrimination against the stigmatized individual or group.

The impact of stigma in health care is well documented and shown to be far reaching, contributing to health disparities through its negative effect on individual health status and as a barrier to access and delivery of quality healthcare services.

Stigma is often associated with health conditions. Alcohol use disorders and substance use disorders are among the most stigmatized of medical conditions.

Alcohol use by women and alcohol use disorders in women are often viewed more unfavorably than those in men. Many societies hold negative attitudes or public stigma towards women who drink alcohol, especially women who engage in heavy drinking.

Stigma associated with drinking during pregnancy is common, yet the reasons that women may drink while pregnant – including alcohol dependence, mixed health messages, and disruptive social conditions – are not widely recognized or understood. Understanding these reasons can help combat stigma and stereotyping.

According to a 2012 NOFAS survey of Circle of Hope birth mothers, some of the reasons women drank while pregnant include:

- Misinformation: “I thought using alcohol was safe. My doctor never told me I should not be drinking.”
- Unaware: “I didn’t know I was pregnant. I stopped as soon as I found out.”
- Addiction: “I am an alcoholic. I couldn’t stop and was ashamed to look for treatment.”
- Fear or Shame: “I was afraid to look for help. I was afraid I would be arrested, and I would lose my children.”

For women who are struggling with their alcohol use or have an alcohol use disorder, the self-stigma, embarrassment, and perception of being devalued or judged by their family, colleagues, or healthcare professionals can serve as a barrier to accessing treatment and to achieving and sustaining recovery.

The fear of judgment or perception of being devalued is one of the reasons that women may not disclose to healthcare professionals or others that they drank, or are drinking, during their pregnancy.