



Social stigma and COVID-19

COVID-19 is a new disease about which we still have much to learn. It is understandable that people may be confused, anxious or fearful about these unknowns. Unfortunately, fear has led to social stigma towards certain groups in our community.

Everyone has an important role to play in preventing and stopping stigma associated with COVID-19. This document can be used as a tool to support conversations and general messaging around this important issue. It is intended for use by government agencies, health care providers, employers, community groups, local businesses, media and other groups who may need to address social stigma and COVID-19.

What is social stigma?

Social stigma is a strong feeling of disapproval that people in a society have about something, especially when this is unfair. The current COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as people who have become unwell with COVID-19. These feelings and behaviours have been extended to anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus, such as recent travellers or healthcare workers.

Such attitudes can negatively affect those with the disease (or those who may have been in contact with the disease), as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities.

Why is COVID-19 causing so much social stigma?

The level of stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors:

1. This is a new disease with many unknowns;
2. The unknowns create fear; and
3. Fear creates a need to blame others.

What is the impact?

Stigma can disrupt community harmony and prompt behaviours that result in the social isolation of certain groups. These behaviours can contribute to a situation where the virus is more, not less, likely to spread. For example, people may try to hide their illness to avoid discrimination.

How to address social stigma

How we communicate about COVID-19 is critical in supporting people to take effective action to help combat the disease and to avoid fuelling fear and stigma. The way we can do this is by:

- correcting misconceptions, rumours or misinformation;
- sharing facts and accurate information about COVID-19;
- sharing stories and experiences of people or groups who have been affected by COVID-19; and,

- communicating support and encouragement for people working on the COVID-19 response frontline (e.g. healthcare workers).

Important facts we can share to help reduce stigma

- Anyone can become sick with COVID-19 regardless of their nationality or cultural background.
- For most people, the risk of becoming seriously ill from the virus that causes COVID-19 is low.
- It can take between 2 and 14 days for a person to develop symptoms of COVID-19 after they have been exposed to the virus. If someone has completed their 14 days of self-isolation (e.g. after returning from travel or after close contact with a person unwell with COVID-19) and remained well, it means they do not have COVID-19. They do not pose any risk of infection to other people in the community and can safely return to normal activities.
- When someone who has been unwell with COVID-19 recovers and is medically cleared and released from self-isolation, they do not pose any risk of infection to other people in the community and can safely return to work, school and other normal activities.
- To help keep our community healthy, everyone (including those who are or have been in self-isolation and those who have recovered from COVID-19), must continue to practice good hand hygiene and cough etiquette and appropriate social distancing, and must stay home if they are sick.
- Stigmatising people can be harmful and can result in people not accessing health care or mental health support that they need.
- Everyone can help stop stigma related to COVID-19 by knowing the facts and sharing them with others in the community.
- There is no place for fear or anger towards people who have been in self-isolation because of COVID-19. We need to support each other through this difficult period. Stigma and discrimination hurt everyone.

Source of Information: [Guide to preventing and addressing social stigma associated with COVID-19](#), Produced by World Health Organization, UNICEF, IFRC

Last updated 8 May 2020

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with disability.

© Department of Health 2020

Copyright to this material is vested in the State of Western Australia unless otherwise indicated. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced or re-used for any purposes whatsoever without written permission of the State of Western Australia.

health.wa.gov.au