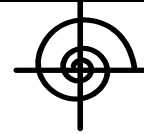




# Stigma, Discrimination and HIV/AIDS

## Stigma

*A quality that is seen to mark an individual as different or “bad”.*



### According to UNAIDS:

The “stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS are the greatest barriers to preventing further infections, providing adequate care, support and treatment and alleviating impact.”

### Why are people living with HIV/AIDS stigmatized (seen as different or “bad” due to their HIV status) ?

- People may be afraid of “catching” HIV because they don’t know how it is transmitted or they wrongly believe they can catch it through casual contact like hugging or sharing a drinking glass
- People living with HIV/AIDS may be members of already marginalized populations (e.g. injection drug users, men who have sex with men)
- Their behaviours may be seen as bad or wrong (e.g. sexual activity, injection drug use)
- People may think that it is the individual’s own fault they were infected with HIV.

For all of these reasons, people living with HIV/AIDS find themselves being stigmatized by family, friends, employers, coworkers, landlords and /or service providers who fail to respect their dignity.

“I’ve been called ‘AIDS junkie’ who get off my property before I call the police”

“People call you faggot, you know, you deserve what you got”

“I’ve had a couple say, that’s ok, we’ll put a cup away in the cupboard and keep it for you. And I look at them and say excuse me, I didn’t get it drinking coffee!”

“That’s where the discrimination comes in, because the fear is so huge. ‘Well, I don’t want to end up like you!’ ”

The information on this sheet is **not legal advice**. If you have specific legal questions you should talk to a lawyer.

## Discrimination



*People who are stigmatized often experience discrimination. Discrimination is the behaviour or action tied to stigma.*

People living with HIV/AIDS experience two kinds of discrimination: **Direct** and **Indirect** Discrimination.

**Direct Discrimination:** is when people are treated differently because they belong to a stigmatized group.

**Example #1:** A dentist refuses to treat a patient because the dentist doesn’t “feel comfortable” treating someone who is living with HIV. This is direct discrimination on the basis of HIV status. A dentist who refuses to treat someone living with HIV due to their HIV status is breaking the rules of their own professional organization and is potentially violating Alberta’s human rights law.

**Example #2:** An employer fires an employee or cuts back their hours after they find out the employee is living with HIV. This is direct discrimination on the basis of HIV status. The law considers HIV to be a disability. Discriminating against someone at work because of a disability is a violation of Alberta’s human rights law.

**Indirect Discrimination:** This occurs when people are treated the same as everyone else, but it has a negative impact on them because their difference is not being respected or accommodated.

**Example:** A doctor gives an injection drug user living with HIV a standard amount of pain medication but that amount is not high enough to be effective because the person has a higher tolerance for medications. The doctor is suspicious that the drug user has entered the hospital to get drugs and the doctor will not increase the amount of medication even though the person is in pain.

In this case, the doctor treats the patient the same as they would treat other people (i.e. gives them the same dose of medication) but it has a different impact on them because they have a higher tolerance for medication than most people. This is indirect discrimination and is a violation of Alberta’s human rights law.

# The Damage Done

Stigma and Discrimination do real damage to people's lives:

- Being fired, pressured to resign, having hours cut back
- Being evicted, being harassed into leaving housing
- Being denied services by doctors and dentists
- Depression, stress, isolation
- Negative health impacts
- Severe poverty
- Fear

"It boils [down] to loss, the risk of loss, and the degrees of it"



"For the longest time since my diagnosis, [my family] would go to family functions and tell the rest of the family that I had leukemia and not HIV. They were embarrassed to even be associated with me."

"I don't necessarily at times even consider myself as part of the society. And perhaps that's part of the discrimination...that I continue to address...because on some level I don't feel part of society. I feel a part of abandoned rejected society. I really do."

## Challenges to Overcome

Many things make it difficult for people living with HIV to believe in and stand up for their rights. It is important to understand these because they need to be overcome before people can begin to challenge the discrimination they face.

"Once you're defeated by the family, by the friends, it makes you weaker when it comes to fighting for your rights as far as employment or out on the street. Because when it's so close to home that you don't have value, that you're an abomination and all these things, it weakens the soul as far as being able to deal with the outside issues".

"I think for me, discrimination is something I am so bloody used to, it's so much a part of my being on the planet, that I'm almost numb about the whole topic. It's just been what I've walked with my whole life, so that fact that I was HIV positive, I was already so laden with discrimination that it's like, oh, big deal. I'm quite numb about the whole issue"

"The barrier for me is exposing myself to risk. The risk of discrimination. The risk of rejection. We've all experienced so much of that in our lives... When you go to challenge something you just risk further rejection... Not to mention the energy it takes!"

As these statements show, people living with HIV may feel powerless, worthless, numb or scared of facing even more rejection. What is important to remember is that all people, no matter who they are, have rights. Everybody has the power to stand up for those rights. The law is there to protect you from discrimination. AIDS Calgary has resources that can help you if you chose to fight for the dignity of people living with HIV.

## Rights and Respect

It is time that the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS were recognized and respected.

- Know your Rights.
- Read AIDS Calgary's Fact Sheets
- Speak out about Human Rights Abuse
- Advocate for yourself and others

## Further Reading

This fact sheet was adapted in part from the following sources:

**A Conceptual Framework and Basis for Action: HIV/AIDS Stigma and Discrimination**, UNAIDS World AIDS Campaign 2003-2003.

[http://www.unaids.org/wac/2002/campaign\\_en.html](http://www.unaids.org/wac/2002/campaign_en.html)

**Human Rights Law and Harm Reduction in the Context of HIV/AIDS**, Powerpoint presentation by Ruth Carey, HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario (HALCO)

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