Empathy Lens:

Humanizing Images & Education for Reducing Stigma Against People Who Use Drugs

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UW Addictions, Drug & Alcohol Institute

May 2025

ADAI ADDICTIONS, DRUG & ALCOHOL INSTITUTE | INFORMATION SERVICES

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES
School of Medicine

ADAI Information Team

Photo from the Empathy Lens collection – Recovery Cafe

Meg Brunner, MLIS

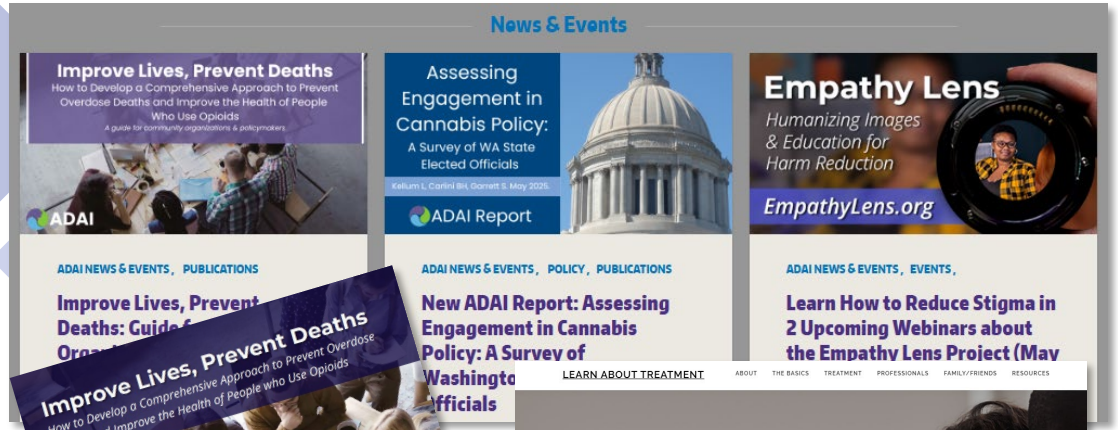
- Specializes in info management & accessibility
- ADAI alum for over 25 years
- Project web developer

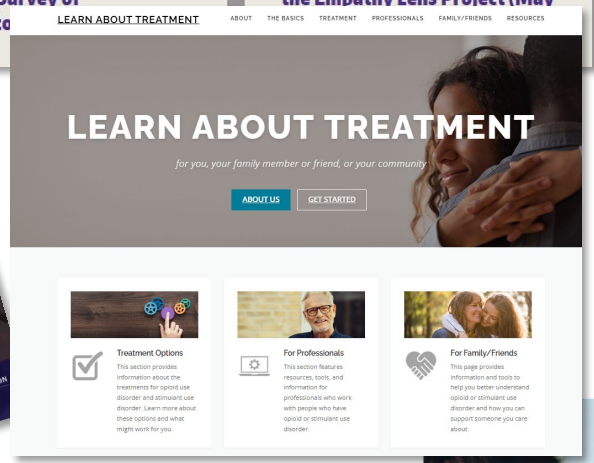
Erinn McGraw, BFA

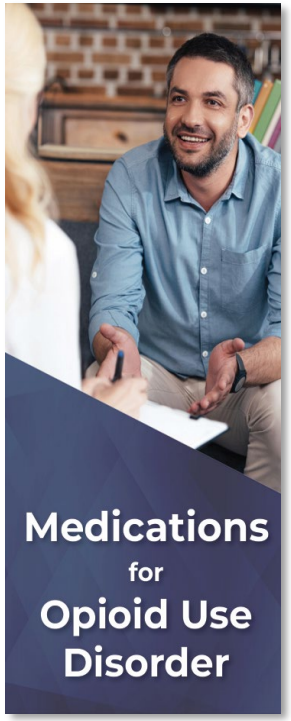
- Specializes in graphic & educational design
- ADAI alum for over 8 years
- Project photographer

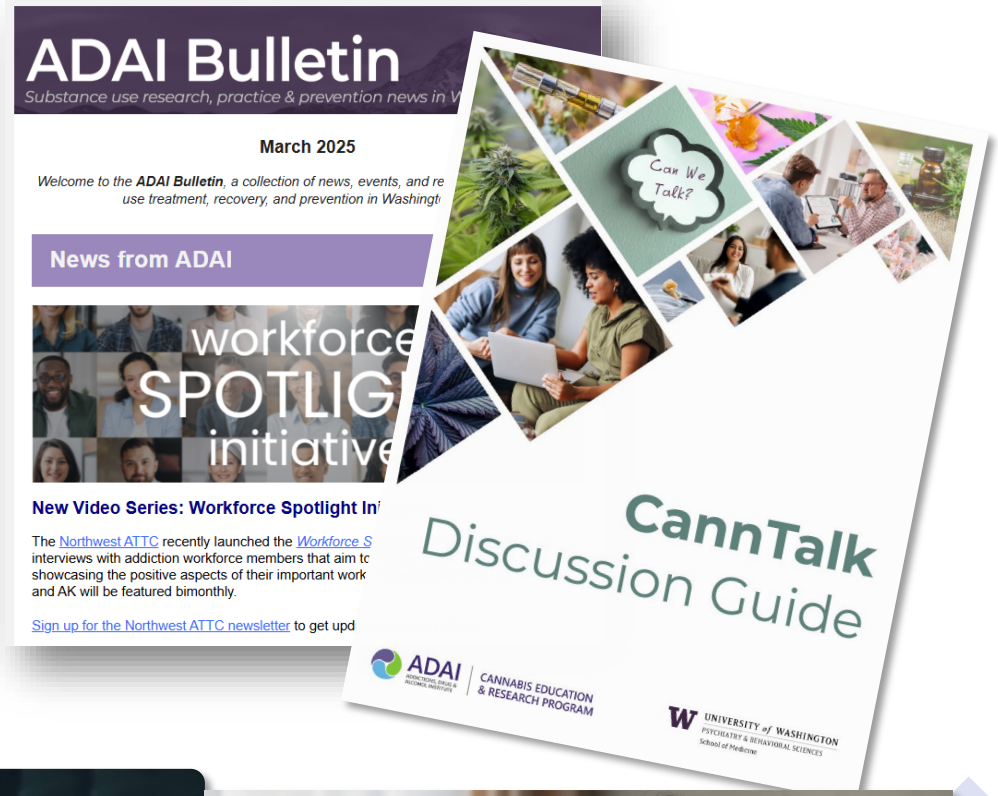
Photo of the Empathy Lens collection photographer!

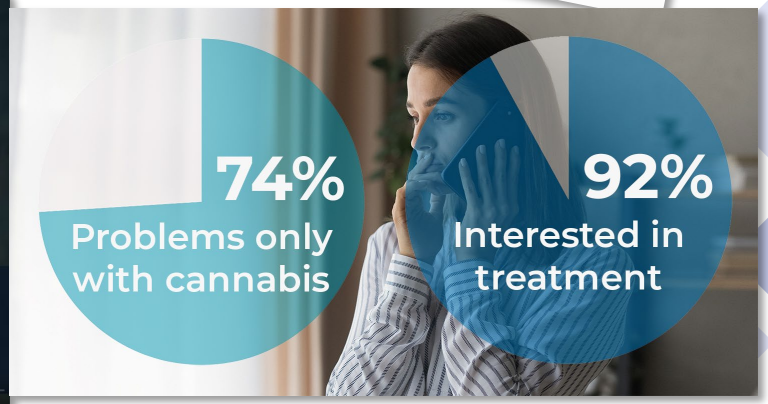
What we use images for











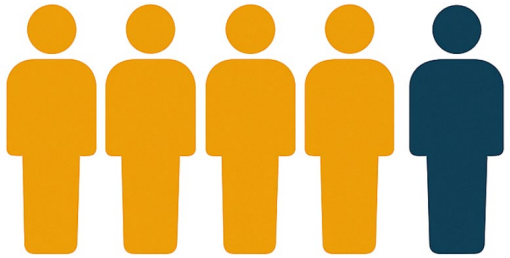
Empathy Lens Project

Humanizing Images & Education for Reducing Stigma Against People Who Use Drugs

Problem we're trying to help solve

48.5 million people

age 12 or older in 2023 had an SUD in the past year



Over 4/5ths

didn't receive treatment

Of those who wanted tx but didn't seek it:

74%

Thought they should have been able to handle their substance use on their own

44%

Were worried what people would think or say if they got treatment

Problem we're trying to help solve

35%

worried info wouldn't be kept private

34%

afraid bad things would happen

39%

didn't know where to go for help

(Anti-)**Stigma 101**

Recovery Cafe (EmpathyLens.org)

What is stigma?

- Negative or unfair beliefs someone has about something
- Mark of shame or discredit

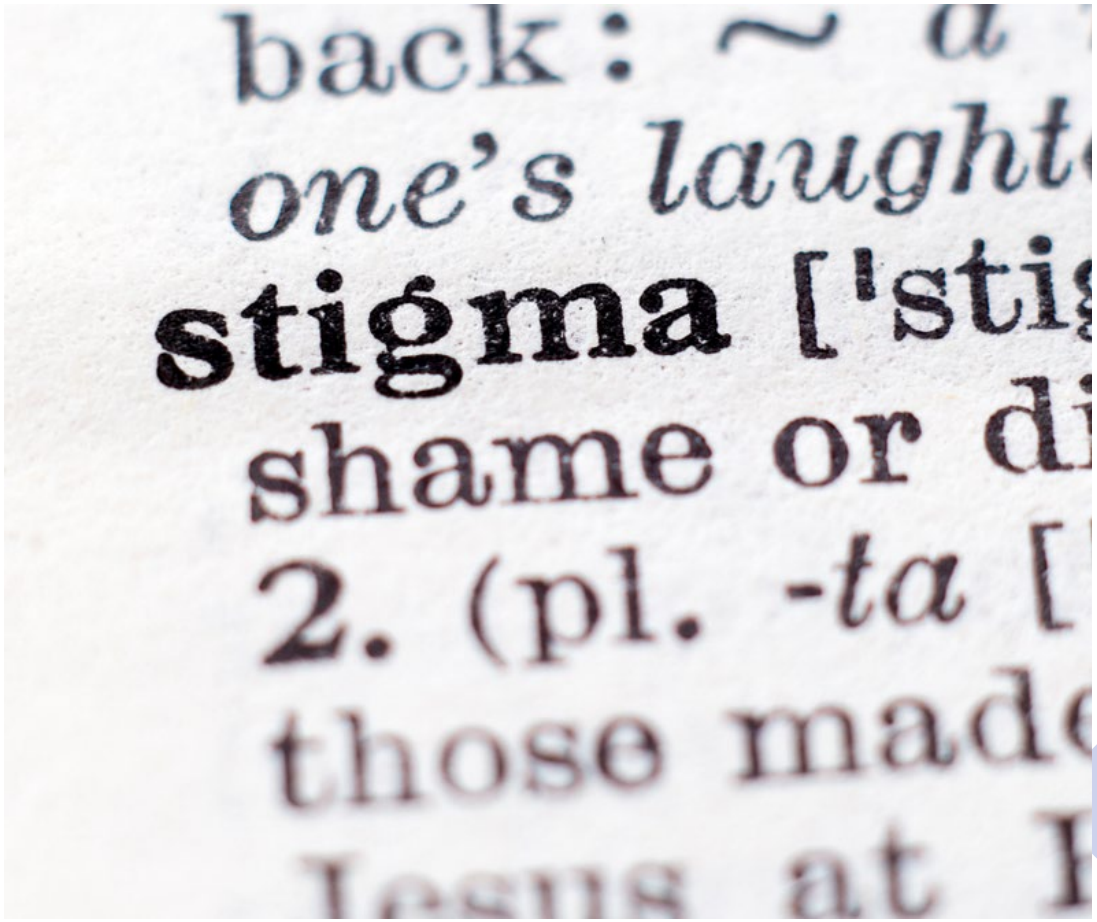


Image source: Shutterstock

Stigma impacts

- Dehumanization
- Treatment hesitancy
- Lower rates of:
  - Healthcare delivery
  - Help-seeking
  - Treatment retention
- Poorer health outcomes

Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Sources: Krendl & Perry, 2023; Habib, et al.,2023; Haque & Waytz, 2012

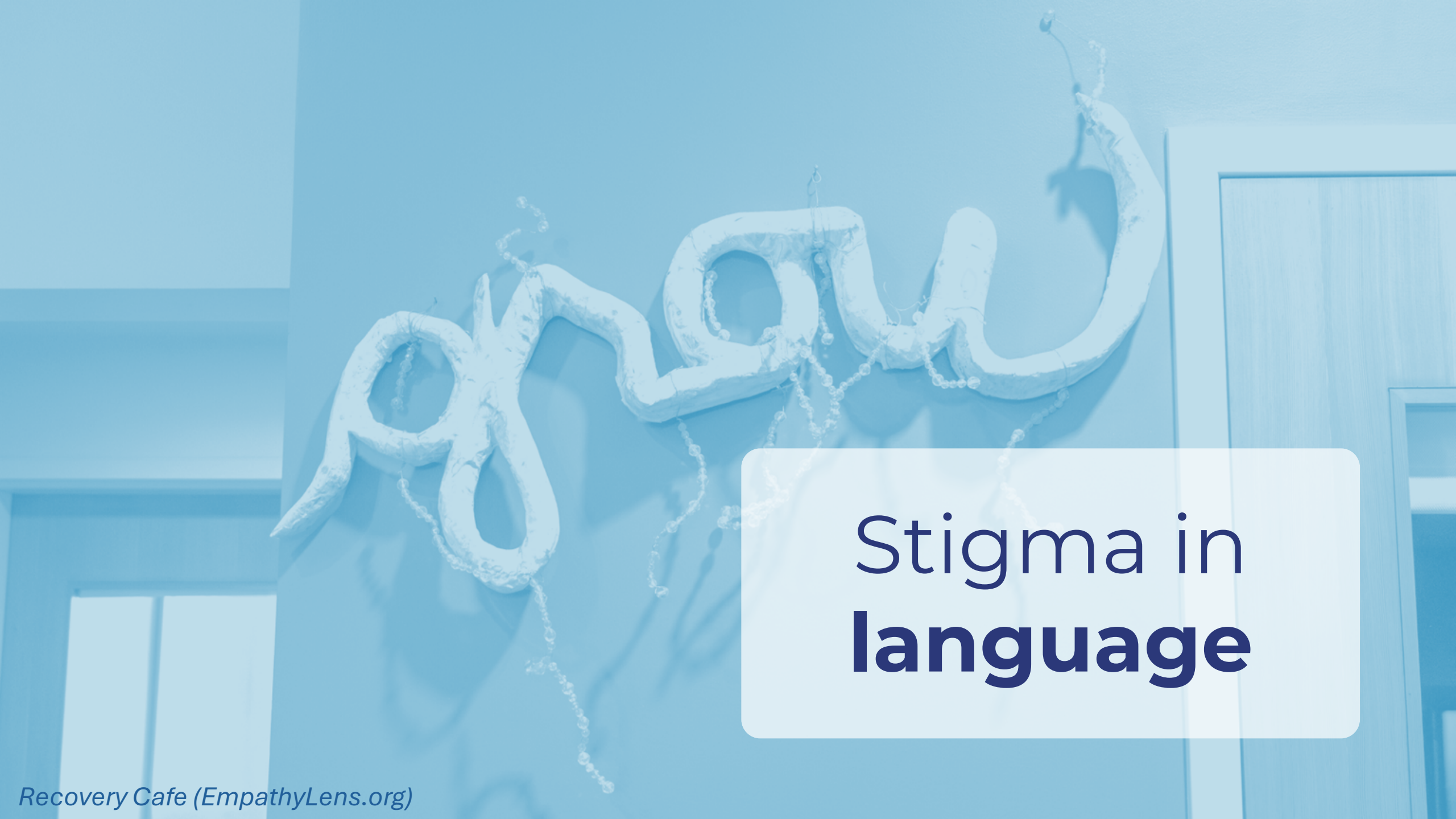
Stigma – Three types

Self-stigma

Public stigma

Structural stigma

Source: Krendl & Perry, 2023



Stigma in **language**

Stigmatizing language effects

- Feelings of blame or disgust
- Increased implicit bias
- Increased desire for punitive action/punishment
- Increased perception someone is dangerous
- Make people afraid to help

Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

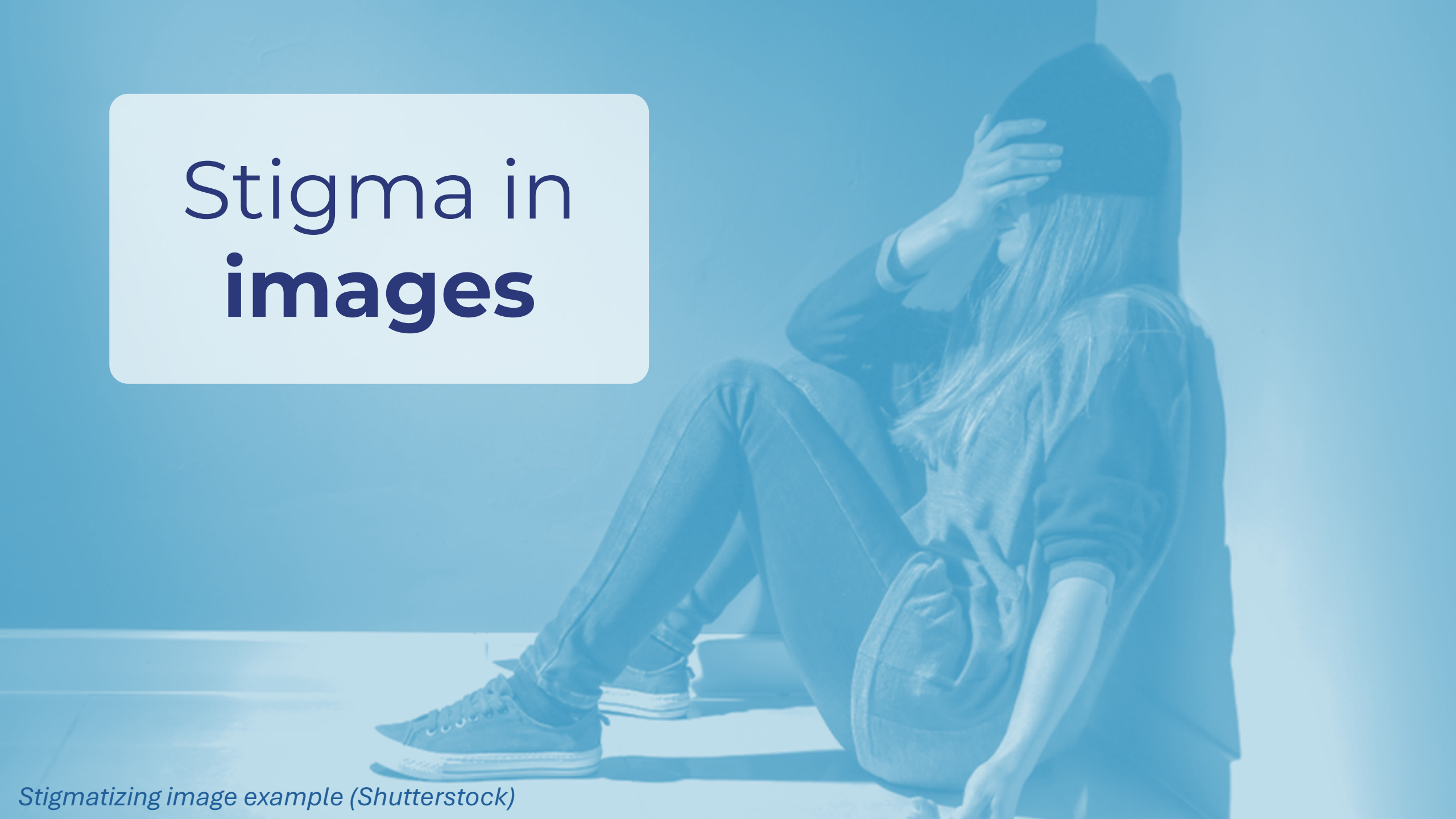
Sources: Hulsey et al., 2023; Ledford et al., 2021

Language tips

- **Use person-first language**
- Use language that reflects the **medical nature of SUD**
- Use language that **promotes recovery and hope**!
- Avoid **slang**, idioms, and jargon

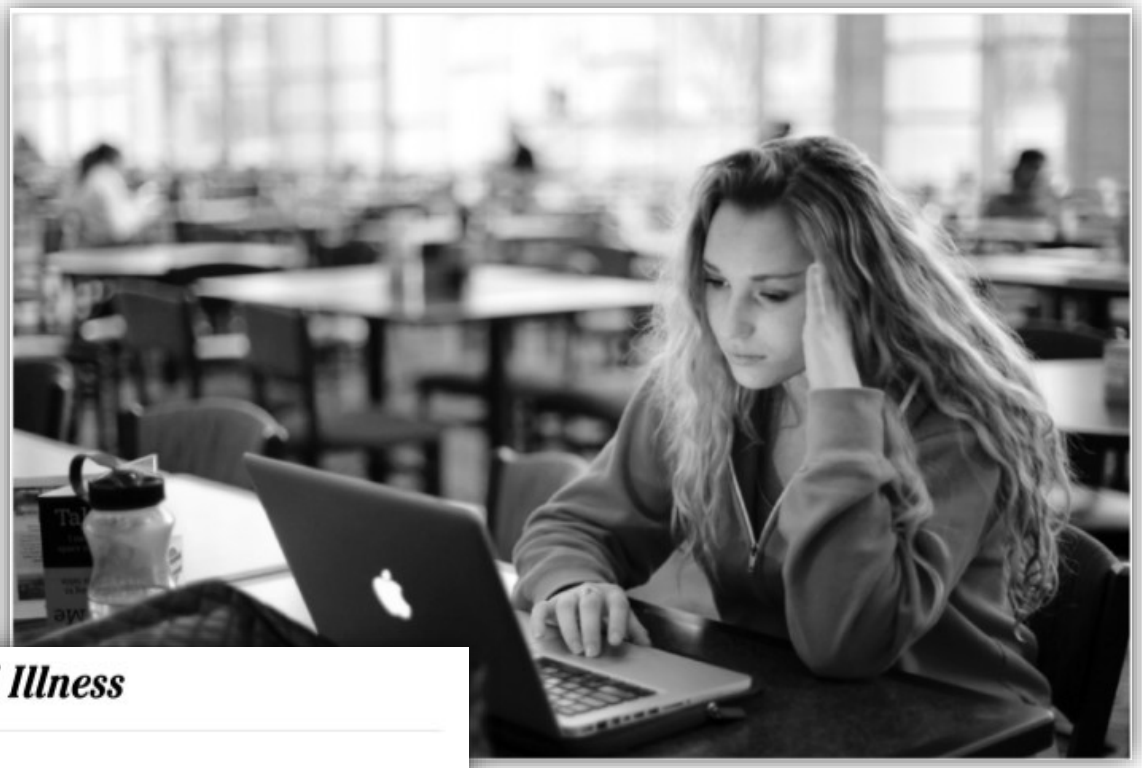
Image source: Some guy on the internet

Stigma in **images**



Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Images can do good!



A Closer Look at Mental Illness

By Tracy Andrews June 25, 2016

When Eliza Smith, 19, went off to college, she was excited to leave behind her old school, her old routines—and her old mental health challenges.

Smith started struggling with depression early in high school. With help from her doctor, she began to get better.

She had been doing so well the summer before college that she stopped therapy when she began school at Xavier College, West Virginia. But a few months into her first semester, she relapsed.

Smith was too exhausted to get out of bed. On days she did make it out of bed, she would fall asleep on the couch. All she wanted to do was disappear.

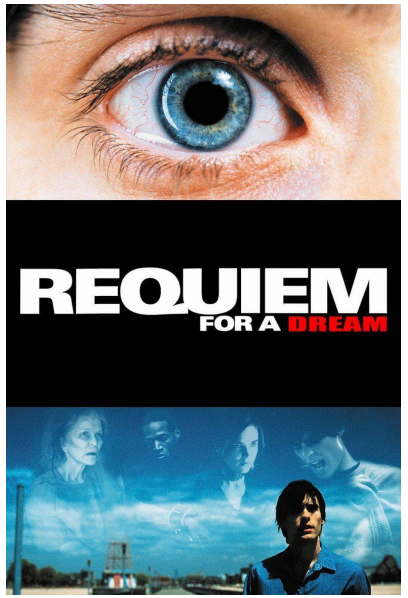
Interacting with people took all the energy she had. When she did, it was hard to silence the babble of negative thoughts in her head.

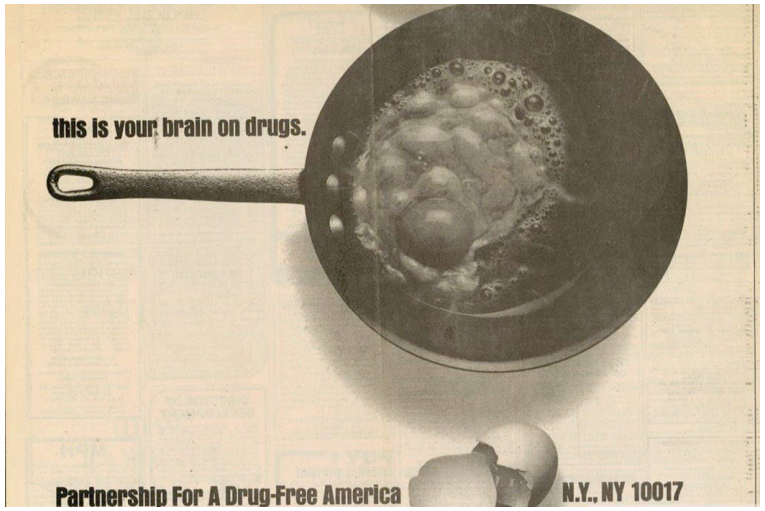
Images can do harm!

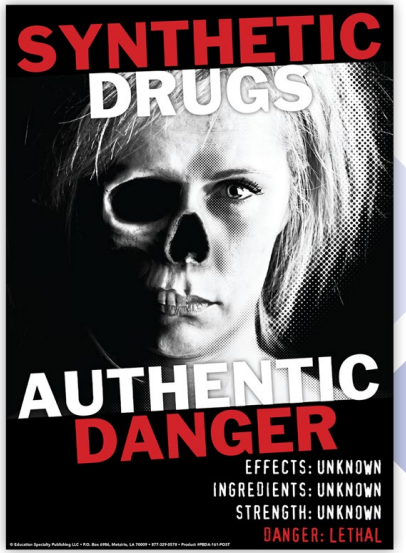
- Reinforce stereotypes and prejudice
- Change how someone thinks, feels, responds to topic
- Perpetuate misinformation
- Trigger craving/cue reactivity

Stigmatizing image example (Shutterstock)

Media portrayals of drug use







Source: Montagne, 2011; Ghosh et al., 2022

Media portrayals of drug use

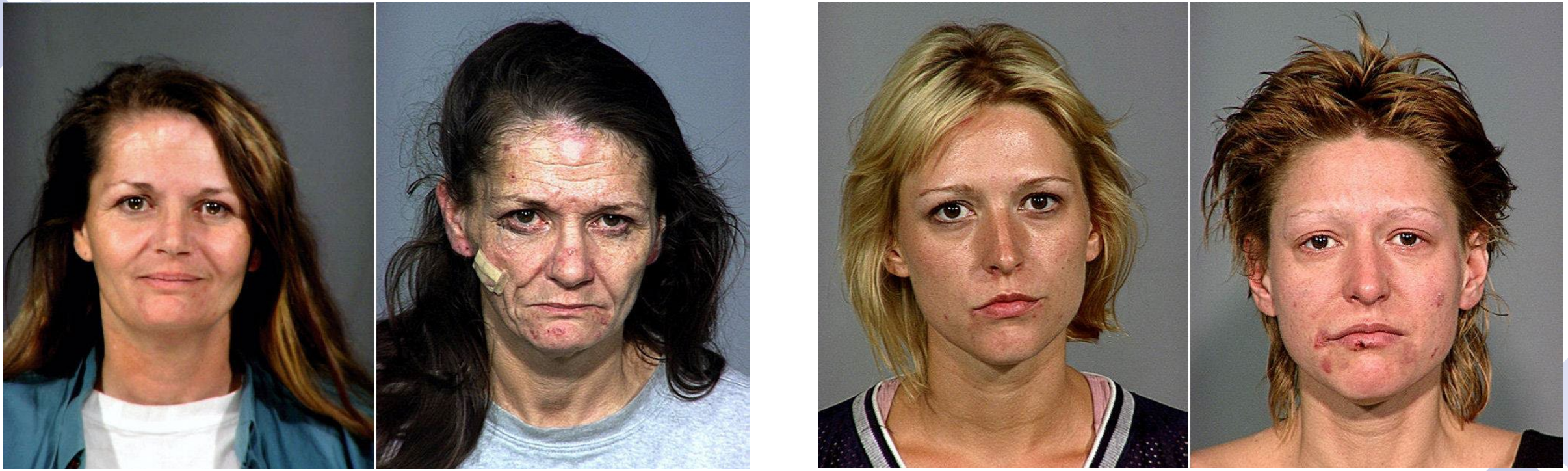
Egan, 2018 (New York Times)

Richards, 1994 (book)

Source: Habib et al., 2023

Prevention campaign imagery

Faces of Meth prevention campaign

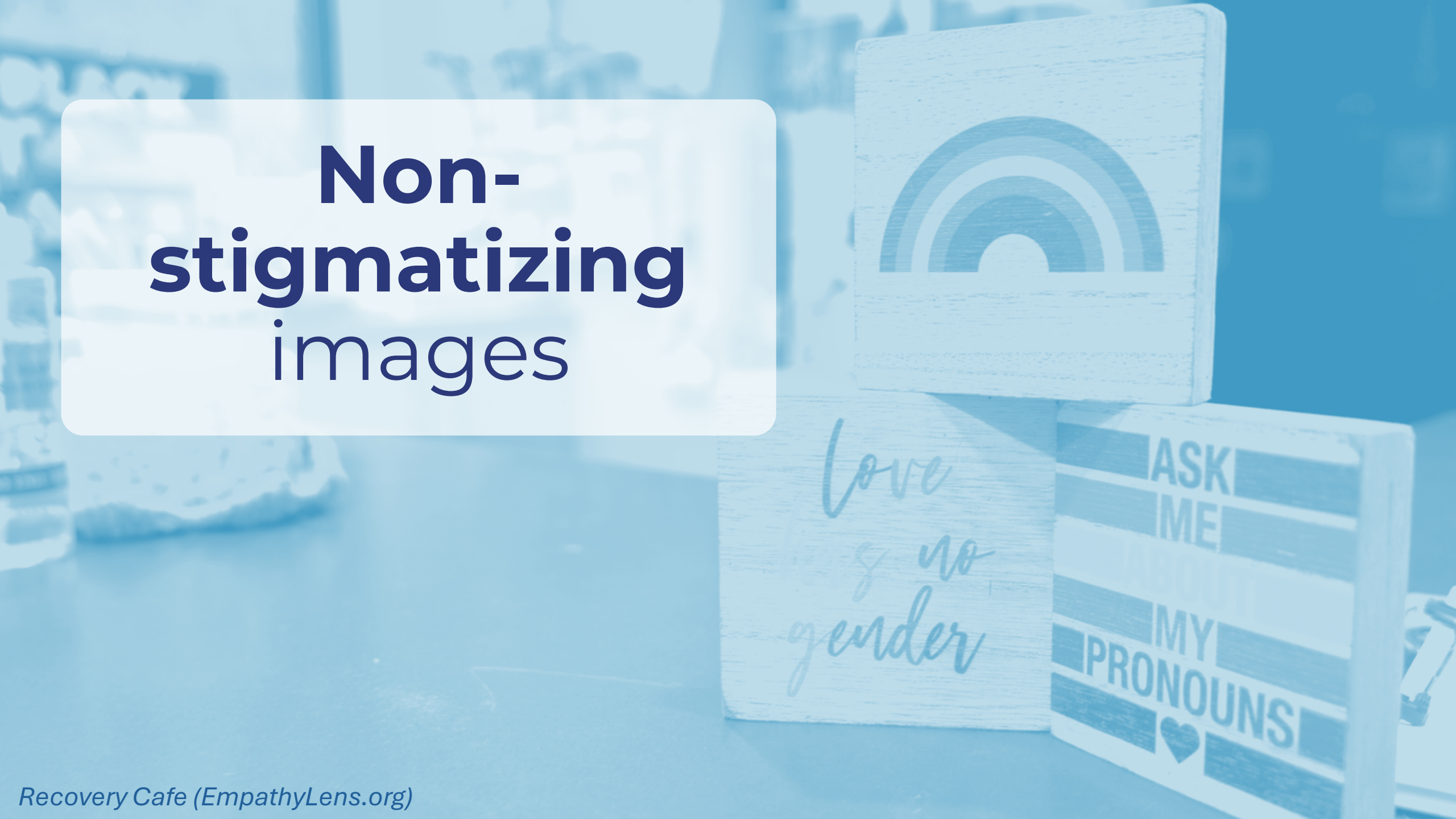


Source: Marsh et al., 2017

Prevention campaign imagery

Source: Marsh et al., 2017

Non-stigmatizing images

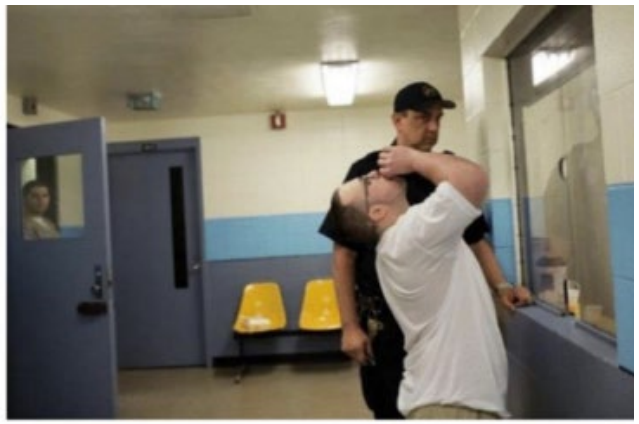


Recovery Cafe (EmpathyLens.org)

What about non-stigmatizing images?

A person injecting drugs

A person receiving medication treatment for drug addiction



A person receiving medication treatment for drug addiction in jail

A person with a photo of a family member who died from overdose

Emergency services attending to a person who has had a drug overdose

A person with drug addiction in recovery

A person with drug addiction in recovery

Images impact stigma, emotions

Person in recovery reduced stigma

Active drug use increased “disgust”

Source: Hom et al., 2025

MOUD: Community vs. jail settings

Community MOUD reduced anger/disgust

Jail MOUD did not

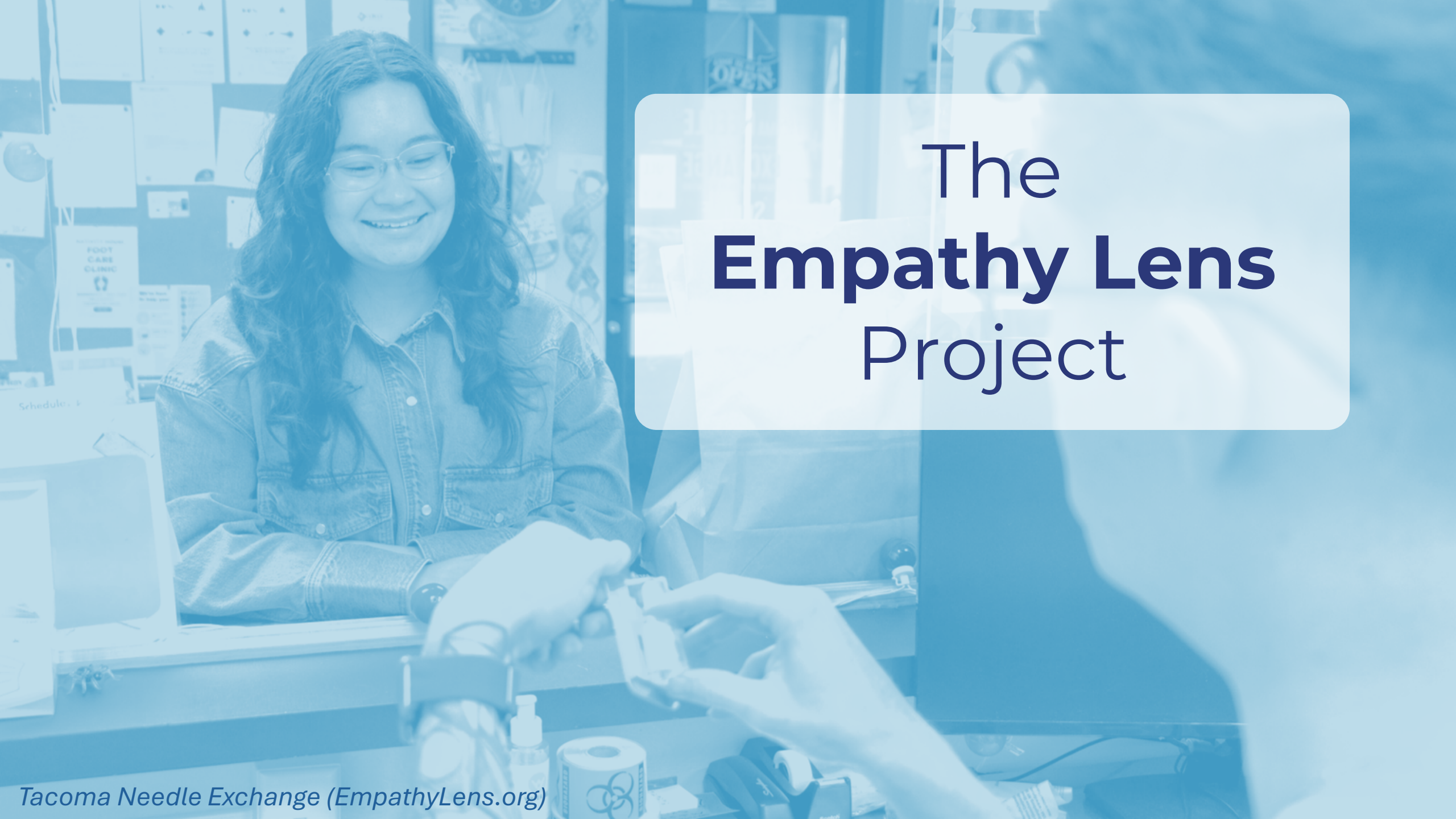
NIMBY attitudes – no change

Syringe services program (EmpathyLens.org)

- **48.4%** treatment program
- **26.2%** syringe services program
- **22.3%** safe consumption site

Photos can reduce stigma!

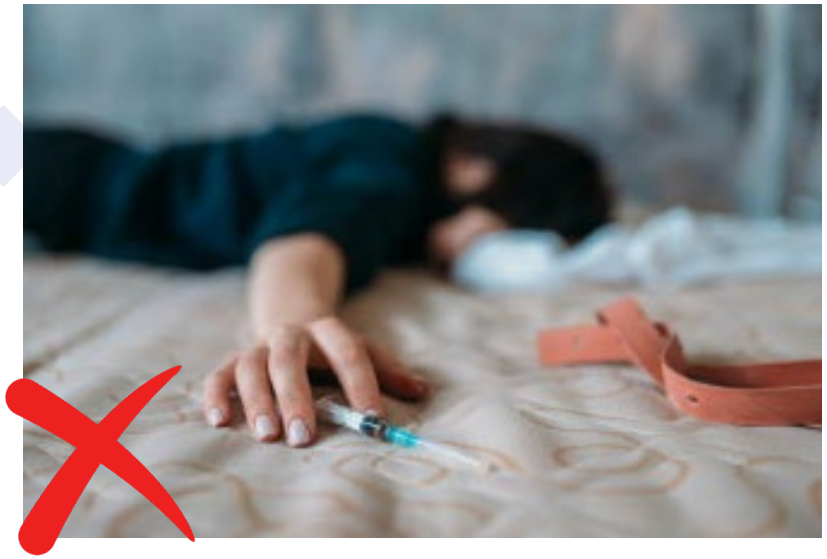
Tacoma Needle Exchange (EmpathyLens.org)

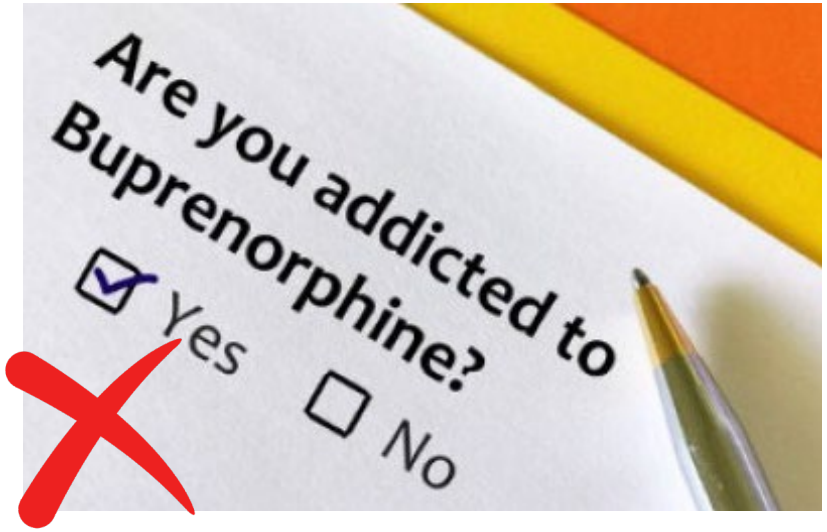


The **Empathy Lens** Project

Tacoma Needle Exchange (EmpathyLens.org)

Empathy Lens: Background



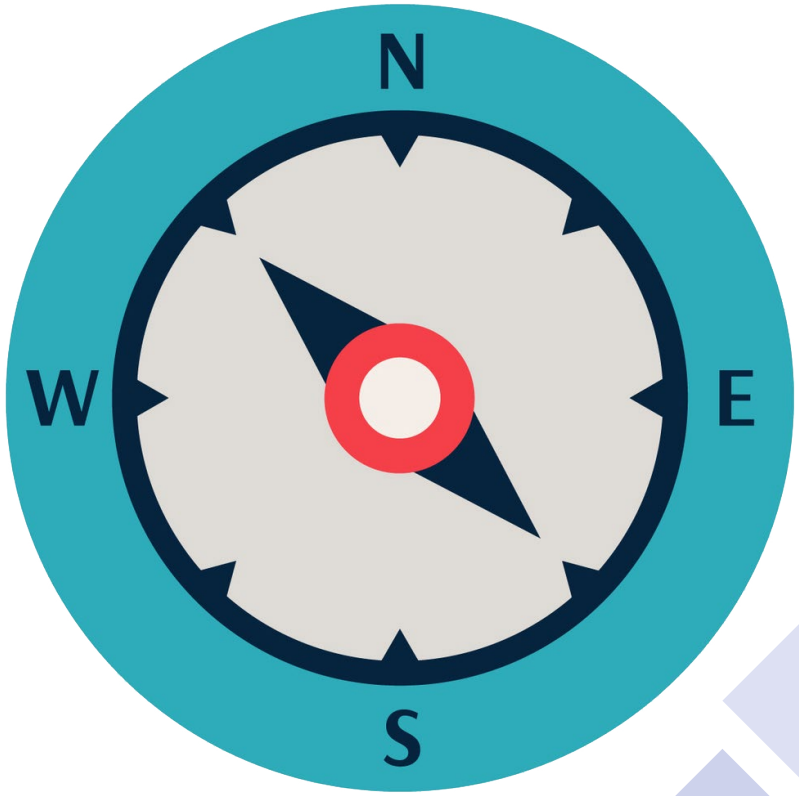


- **Problem:** hard to find good images of substance use-related services
- **Larger problem:** existing stock photos are stigmatizing & incorrect
- **Solution:** create a collection of images ourselves by partnering with community orgs!

Funded by the Network of the National Library of Medicine (NIH) Outreach & Education Award – June 2024

Empathy Lens: Goals

- **Real life** spaces, supplies, interactions
  - *Show services in a humanizing way*
  - *Staff volunteers instead of clients*
- **Collaborate with orgs** on intentions and accuracy
- **Offer collection for free** & without restrictions to remove barriers for use
- **Educate the public** on stigma



Empathy Lens: Making the collection

- **Three site visits**
  - Blue Mountain Heart 2 Heart
    Walla Walla
  - Tacoma Needle Exchange
    Tacoma
  - Recovery Café SLU
    Seattle

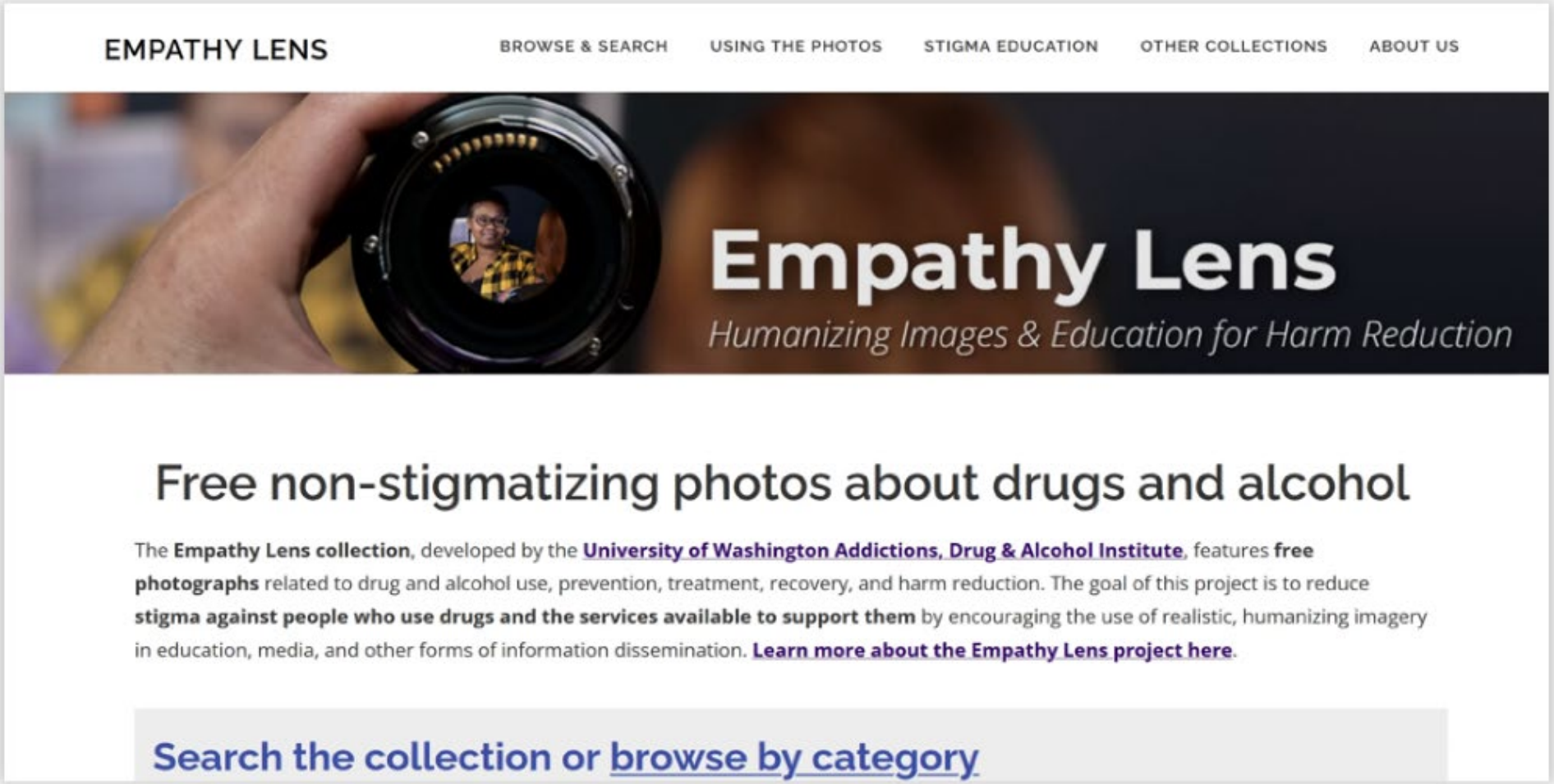
- Over 200+ photos edited!

Empathy Lens: Making the collection

EmpathyLens.org

- Photo collection
- Stigma education
  Brand new brochure!
- Other collections

Empathy Lens: Website tour



Empathy Lens: Photos

Empathy Lens: Photos

Empathy Lens: Stigma education

Empathy Lens: Stigma education

What is stigma and how does it affect people?

Stigma is negative opinions or judgments about others. In terms of drug use, stigma means looking down on someone who uses drugs or has an addiction (also called a "substance use disorder").

Stigma can happen anywhere, including healthcare. For people who use drugs, stigma can:

- Make them feel ashamed, left out, or treated unfairly
- Make others see them as less than human
- Lead to worse healthcare, not seeking or getting help, and poorer health

Our choices matter

The words and images we choose can increase stigma. For example, calling someone a "junkie" or an "addict" makes it seem like drug use is their whole identity.

Instead, using "person-first" language (like "a person with a substance use disorder") recognizes that they are more than their addiction. The same idea is true for images.

Pictures are powerful! They shape how we think and feel, sometimes without us even realizing it.

How can I choose images that aren't stigmatizing?

Here are some tips on selecting images that don't spread stigmatizing ideas about people who use drugs or services that help provide support:

1. **Watch out for misinformation**
   Make sure images don't spread false information.
2. **Avoid triggering images**
   Stay away from images of drugs or drug supplies unless you need to explain something specific.
3. **Show different kinds of people**
   People who use drugs (and those who help them) come from all races, genders, and ages.
4. **Keep it positive and simple**
   Avoid dramatic, sad, or scary images. Show everyday people in normal, supportive situations.
5. **Make it humanizing**
   Avoid images that focus on the drugs instead of the person. Use images showing them as full people, not as just their drug use.

Examples:

Do: *Someone getting safer use supplies. They look happy to get care from someone helpful and kind.*

Are you a
Buprenorp
☑ Yes

Do: *A welcoming, friendly contingency management session, one of the few proven treatments for stimulant use disorder.*

Download:

empathylens.org/stigma-education

Coming soon!

Order for free via ADAI Clearinghouse

adaiclearinghouse.net

Other collections

Other free image collections:

- The Gender Spectrum Collection
  genderspectrum.vice.com
- Sexual Health & Liberation Photo Collection
  bhocpartners.org/health-photos
- Disabled and Here Collection
  affectttheverb.com/collection
- Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Public Domain Photo Database
  jsad.com/photos

Info on substance use:

- UW Addictions, Drug & Alcohol Institute
  adai.uw.edu
- LearnAboutTreatment.org
  learnabouttreatment.org
- LearnAboutCannabisWA.org
  learnaboutcannabiswa.org
- Medline Plus
  medlineplus.gov

Selecting **Non-Stigmatizing** Images

Recovery Cafe (EmpathyLens.org)

Study overview: Hulsey et al.

- **Studied reactions** of people with lived SUD experience to SUD-related images
- Diverse backgrounds, all in recovery
- Small sample size
- More research in this area needed

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Stigmatizing imagery for substance use disorders: a qualitative exploration

Jessica Hulsey, Kayla Zawislak, Ginnie Sawyer-Morris & Valerie Earnshaw

Health & Justice **11**, Article number: 28 (2023) | Cite this article

9945 Accesses | **36** Altmetric | Metrics

Abstract

Background

Stigma is a significant barrier to the treatment of individuals with substance use disorders. While prior efforts have been made to change stigmatizing language to refer to individuals

Study overview: Hulsey et al.

Results

- **Cue reactivity** to images of drug use and drug supplies
- **Dramatic, staged, negative** images triggered negative associations with recovery & treatment
- **Care, support, and positive medical treatment** images reinforced health & wellbeing
- **Diverse representation** important

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Abstract

Background

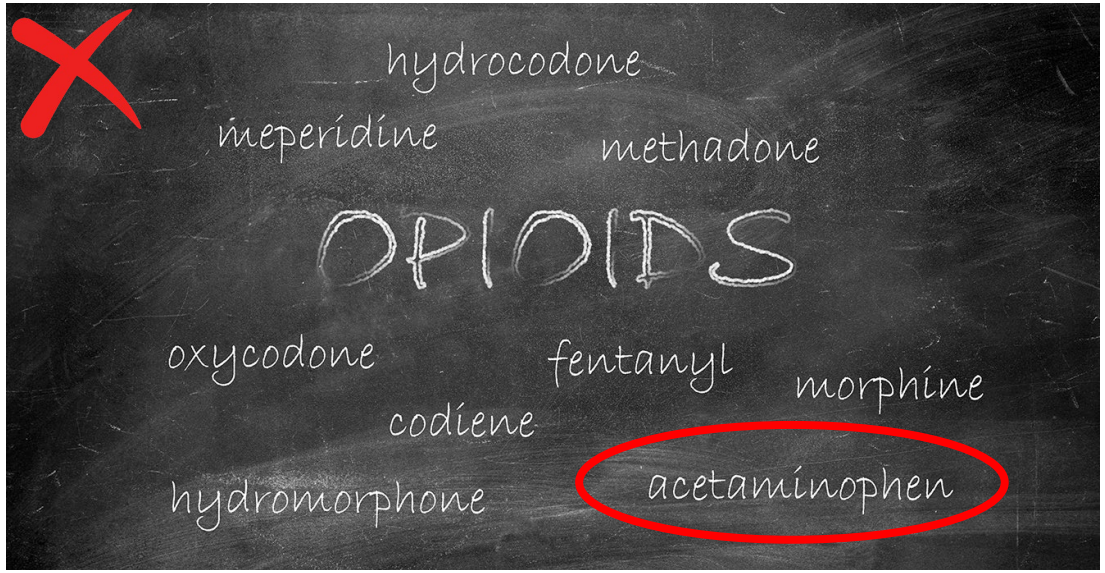
Stigma is a significant barrier to the treatment of individuals with substance use disorders. While prior efforts have been made to change stigmatizing language to refer to individuals

How to pick non-stigmatizing images

Don’ts

1. **Avoid misinformation**

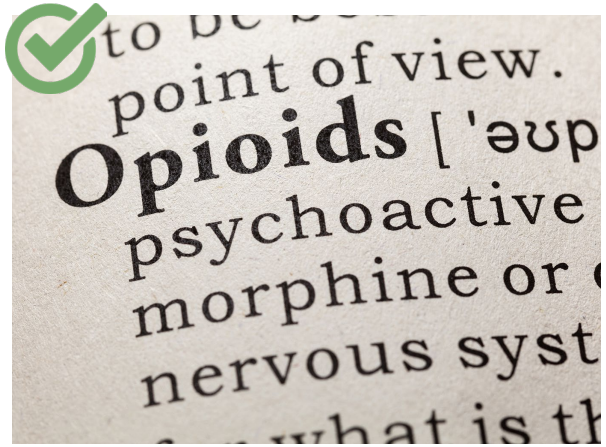
2. **Avoid triggering images**
   Dramatic or negative, drug use/drug supplies



How to pick non-stigmatizing images

Dos

1. **Show different kinds of people**
2. **Keep it positive and simple**
   Everyday people in normal situations, broader concepts
3. **Make it humanizing**
   Focus is on the person/showing them as full people, not just their drug use



Activity: Stigmatizing or not?

Dramatic
Person is clutching their face in distress

Dehumanizing
Their face is blurry & obscured while the drugs are in focus

Triggering
Shows drug supplies (not for education)

Activity: Stigmatizing or not?

Normal
Subject and scene are casual and realistic

Humanizing
Subject is shown as a whole person

Positive
Shows them receiving support & health care supplies

Activity: Stigmatizing or not?

Dramatic
Gives a sense of impending crash/doom

Misinformation
Implies that methadone treatment leads to death

Activity: Stigmatizing or not?

Dehumanizing
Person is hidden, anonymous, reduced to their circumstances

Dramatic
Tone is scary and intense

Triggering
Shows someone in a harsh environment

Activity: Stigmatizing or not?

Humanizing
Subject looks happy to be receiving services

Normal
Setting is neutral and realistic

Positive
Focus is on getting support & care navigation

What's Next for **Empathy Lens?**

Region 5 NNLM

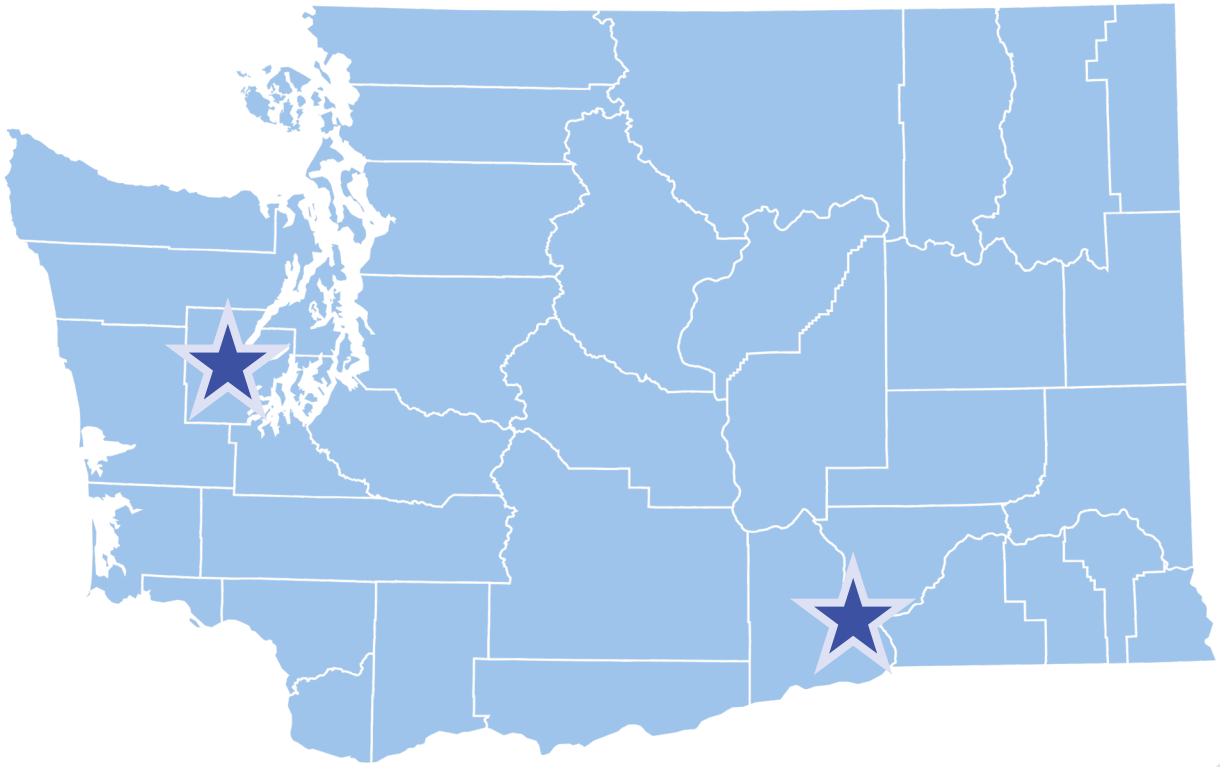
National Library of Medicine
Network of the National Library of Medicine

- Defunded in March by NIH
- Appealing decision but who knows?
- Small grants & training for medlibs
- **Write your congressperson! Save Region 5!**

What's next?

ADAI to the rescue!

- Anti-stigma brochure (print)
- Research paper
- More site visits
  - *Mason Co. Public Health*
  - *BMH2H Kennewick*



Realistic cannabis use photo collection
Drug Policy Alliance

Thank you to our partners!

Blue Mountain HEART to HEART

TACOMA NEEDLE EXCHANGE
A DAVE PURCHASE INITIATIVE

Recovery Café

All amazing organizations & people doing great work!

Questions?

Contact us

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Erinn McGraw, BFA
ecmcgraw@uw.edu

EmpathyLens.org

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