



HIV Stigma and Discrimination

Despite the fact that HIV is now considered a manageable disease, HIV stigma and discrimination remain a significant reality. A 2008 poll of Canadians living with HIV, the Merck HIV+25 Survey¹, revealed that 82% of respondents reported they experienced stigma.

What is HIV stigma?

HIV stigma refers to the prejudice and discrimination directed at people living with HIV. Many groups vulnerable to HIV, such as gay men, transgendered people, people who use drugs, women, sex workers, prisoners, youth, aboriginal people and members of other ethno-cultural minorities already experience marginalization and are subject to homophobia, misogyny, ageism or racism.

What causes HIV stigma?

- Misunderstandings and inaccurate information about HIV and how it's transmitted;
- Judgments made due to the fact that HIV is contracted through drug use and sexual activities, which are often highly stigmatized;
- HIV's life-threatening nature.

Effects of HIV Discrimination

- Reduction or loss of income or limited employment opportunities;
- Loss of relationships with friends, family, partners;
- Poor care within the health sector;
- Withdrawal of care-giving in the home;
- Feelings of shame and worthlessness;
- Loss of social standing/reputation;
- Restrictions on personal freedoms, such as travel, given that some countries deny entry to people living with HIV;
- Fear of criminalization for non-disclosure of HIV-positive status to sexual partners.

How are stigma and discrimination an obstacle to HIV prevention?

Stigma may cause people living with HIV to avoid testing and discourages those who are aware they are HIV-positive from seeking treatment or care for fear of disclosing their status. This can lead to higher rates of transmission and early death.

How can you help end HIV stigma and discrimination?

- If you're a student, encourage the development of gay/straight alliances to alleviate homophobia and heterosexism, components of HIV stigma, in the school environment.
- Learn more about HIV/AIDS to reduce your own fears associated with the disease.
- Support laws and policies that assist people who live with HIV/AIDS.
- If you witness stigma and discrimination, challenge it.

¹ http://www.merckfrosst.ca/assets/en/pdf/press/product_info/isentress/press_releases/pr_20081124.pdf