



## Breaking the Hepatitis C Social Stigma

More people are currently living with Hepatitis C than any other chronic blood-borne infectious disease. Many patients still suffer with the associated stigma in many social circles. Discover two ways to reduce this unfortunate perception of a Hepatitis C diagnosis. Your efforts can help make the changes required.

The MSN Encarta Dictionary defines stigma as "*a sign of social unacceptability: the shame or disgrace attached to something regarded as socially unacceptable.*"

For some people, the stigma of living with Hepatitis C is more harmful than the virus itself. While medical research and treatment primarily target prevention and viral eradication, there is a lot more effort required to change public perception and attitudes toward Hepatitis C. There are two parts to breaking a disease-related stigma: education and self-respect. By educating communities on Hepatitis C and learning to feel good about yourself (regardless of viral status), Hepatitis C can be removed from the category of socially unacceptable conditions.

### Why?

The primary reasons for any condition to be stigmatized are the lack of compassion, fear and ignorance. Hepatitis C is a prime candidate for such an attitude for several reasons:

- *Fear of Transmission* – Because Hepatitis C is an infectious disease without a definitive cure, people are afraid of getting it. Although not easily transmitted, people are nevertheless fearful and may shun those who have the disease. Fear and ignorance have cost those with Hepatitis C their jobs, friendships and marriages.
- *Fear of Illness* – Some people do not like to be around people who are sick. Being uncomfortable around others who have an illness is how certain people protect themselves from their personal fears. This discomfort may cause them to socially reject people with diseases instead of risking exposure to suffering and/or death.
- *Judgment* – Despite the many ways of acquiring Hepatitis C, misinformed people sometimes assume that everyone with Hepatitis C has a history of injection drug use. Even if this is a person's mode of viral acquisition, our society lacks compassion and understanding about injection drug use. Those without personal exposure to injected drugs may judge people who have. Former injection drug users may feel haunted by their pasts and judge themselves.

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Additionally, many active injection drug users carry shame about their addiction. Regardless of the situation, casting judgment on a person for their past addiction or viral status is devoid of compassion for their very personal situation.

Several of Hepatitis C stigma's negative consequences include reduced self-esteem, diminished mental health, less access to medical care and fear of disclosing a positive status. Additionally, this attitude may contribute to hesitancy on the part of some medical providers to treat people infected with Hepatitis C.

In the January 2006 issue of *Hepatitis* magazine, the staff conducted an informal web poll about stigma and viral hepatitis. On the plus side, 42 percent of poll participants felt they had not faced any stigma due to living with hepatitis. However, more than half of all respondents reported being treated differently due to their disease. Of those who participated in the poll, 20 percent felt they had experienced job discrimination due to having Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C, 13 percent reported hepatitis-related social stigma and 13 percent had been alienated from family and friends because of viral hepatitis.

## **Education**

Any social stigma finds its roots in fear of the unknown. Many people have misconceptions about the way Hepatitis C is transmitted. Once diagnosed with the virus, most affected people diligently study how the disease is spread, and how they likely acquired it. However, a person without firsthand experience with Hepatitis C may mistakenly assume it can be transmitted through sharing a glass of water or even from being coughed or sneezed on by an infected person. Until all reaches of society learn the facts about this virus, inaccurate stereotypes fuelled by fear will persist.

Educating yourself and others will break down the stigma associated with Hepatitis C. Many communities have Hepatitis C task forces to promote community awareness. Getting involved with Hepatitis C informational training sessions targeting local schools, hospitals, drug treatment programs, government agencies and similar community organizations will fill replace fear with knowledge, helping to remove the negative perspectives about this disease. In the words of Margaret Mead, *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

## **Self-Respect**

If you have Hepatitis C, the first step in breaking the stigma is to start with your own attitude toward your illness. Some questions to ask in uncovering this include:

- Do you label yourself as a sick person?
- Do you expect to be shunned from co-workers, friends and family?
- Do you feel like you deserve to have Hepatitis C?

Honestly examining your own feelings of shame and working to shift those feelings into pride makes a tremendous difference when facing the world with any illness. Living in the present and looking to the future are the best ways to leave negativity in the past. By learning how other people live with the disease, many people find help in discussing their feelings at Hepatitis C support groups. In order to garner the respect from others, it is absolutely necessary to first develop respect for yourself. Additionally, feeling good is the single most

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important factor in living a long, healthy and rewarding life. Here are nine tips for developing a healthy attitude:

1. Make sure you know the truth. Get accurate information about Hepatitis C. Some people mistakenly believe Hepatitis C is an automatic death sentence. The truth is, the majority will die *with* Hepatitis C, not *of* Hepatitis C.
2. Don't make things worse by imagining a future with pain, disability or loss. Improve your odds by visualizing your future the way you want it. Visualizing health, not illness, is a powerful tool for self-transformation.
3. Maintain perspective of the big picture. Focus your attention on something that brings peace, joy, laughter and meaning. Tell yourself that difficult moments will pass.
4. Watch your words. If you hear yourself talking negatively, substitute positive phrases. Say, "I will find a way to live with Hepatitis C" rather than "Hepatitis C is ruining my life."
5. Practice gratitude. Make it a habit to find things for which you are grateful.
6. Learn what you can control and what you cannot. There are things you cannot control, such as the fact that you have Hepatitis C. However, there are things you can control, such as your attitude and what you say to yourself about having Hepatitis C.
7. Learn from the virus. Ask yourself what Hepatitis C can teach you about living.
8. Get support. Being with others who are dealing with the same issues can bring encouragement and hope.
9. Help others. When it comes to stepping outside of ourselves, probably nothing works as well as reaching out to others who are also struggling.

By cultivating self-respect through a positive attitude and through active participation in educating your community on Hepatitis C, you can take an active role in breaking the Hepatitis C stigma and helping those diagnosed with the disease to finally receive the compassion they deserve.