

# Challenging stigma experienced by women with HIV

**Positive Women's Network** is the longest-running HIV organization for women in Canada and the only women-specific HIV organization in British Columbia.

A community living with and affected by HIV, we provide leadership, support, and education on HIV-related health, social, and prevention initiatives for women.

Though we have learned a great deal about how to medically manage the progression of HIV, social stigma remains a challenge. It can compromise access to health and supportive community care and significantly influence the lives of people living with HIV.

Research has shown that for women living with HIV, receiving and providing peer-driven services can produce a range of benefits associated with care and positive effects to overall health and well-being.

Since 2010, Positive Women's Network has offered five annual peer support trainings, which include a focus on experiences of stigma and ideas for coping. A total of 48 women living with HIV have participated.

1

Discussion helps women distinguish between internal and external sources of stigma. *Internal stigma* can affect whether they see themselves as even deserving of care. *External stigma* in health care and community services can limit how and when they seek access to treatment and support.

2

Women living with HIV develop mechanisms to cope with stigma. Participants have developed resource sheets on coping with stigma, which include tips for physical and psychological wellness, as well as steps women can take when they feel they are experiencing discrimination.

Personalized coping strategies do not address the larger systemic forces that cause HIV stigma to persist.

1

Supporting women to identify internal and external messages and experiences of stigma can help them in terms of self-care, access to health care, and community involvement.

2

Education and campaigns addressing HIV stigma and gendered social and structural violence are needed.

The experience of HIV-related stigma is intensified for women because of gender oppression.

## Tips for coping with stigma

Written by women living with HIV for women living with HIV

### TALK

- Verbalize your fears and feelings
- If you are comfortable, talk to a peer about it
- Call a friend, a support worker, or a counsellor to talk about how you feel
- Ask an ally to talk to the person who made you feel stigmatized
- Talk with an advocate (appropriate to the situation)
- Contact your local HIV service organization

### WRITE

- Try journaling
- Document what happened

### EDUCATE

- Be prepared for stigma and the injuries it causes to your sense of self-worth
- Know your human rights and rights related to HIV
- Learn about the topic that is making you feel stigmatized
- Speak out against stigma
- Help educate others by volunteering at your local HIV service organization

### CONNECT SPIRITUALLY

- Pray and meditate
- Use traditional medicines (e.g., medicinal marijuana, smudge, cedar brushing)
- Talk to your Creator
- Be in nature

### REST & REFLECT

- Remember you are worthy of love and respect
- Draw on your inner strength
- Work on your self-esteem
- Be aware of self-stigma
- Breathe — take several deep inhales and exhales
- Remember the feeling will pass
- Be quiet and still
- Take a nap
- Take a hot shower or bath
- Treat and pamper yourself
- “Fake it ‘til you make it!” — act how you want to feel

### GET ACTIVE

- Release your feelings through activities
- Take a walk, swim, fish, camp
- Do beadwork
- Play a musical instrument
- Read, watch TV, listen to music
- Go shopping
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Ask someone for a hug, or hug a pillow
- Eat good food
- Challenge yourself to do something new
- Create a sanctuary in the corner of your bedroom — a meditation altar, a comfortable place to sit, or somewhere you might put a few special items you love
- Become involved in a women's group

Tips compiled from peer support trainings held in Vancouver and Victoria in July and November 2014.

