



Anticipated & Internalized Stigma in VJP Work

Anticipated Stigma:

Anticipated stigma is worry, distress, or avoidance caused by anticipating that one is going to be stigmatized in certain places or situations. Being cautious about possible sources of prejudice and discrimination can be sensible and self-protective **BUT** when avoidance becomes overly generalized or rigid it can block people from doing things they want or need to do, against their own self interests.

Anticipated stigma can be a real problem for justice-involved Veterans.

Sometimes it takes just once:

For example, a health provider stereotypes a Justice-involved Veteran, the Veteran assumes that providers will “always” act that way and refuses future appointments or help.

Sometimes it builds over time:

After repeated disheartening experiences looking for a job or housing, a justice-involved Veteran starts to think “why even try? It’s useless; no one will accept me”

Sometimes it is indirect:

When justice-involved Veterans (or anyone) hears about others being stigmatized at X place or by Y person they don’t have to experience it directly to want to avoid X or Y

Internalized Stigma:

People can “absorb” society’s stigmatizing messages into their own self-concept and come to believe the messages are true of themselves. Like air pollution harming one’s lungs, internalized stigma can be hard to avoid, harm’s ones sense of self, and is not the person’s fault. It can drain a person’s hope, persistence, motivation and belief in one’s self unless actively resited. It is also called “self-stigma.”

Internalized stigma can be a difficult burden for justice-involved Veterans.

People often have difficulty articulating internalized self-beliefs. They get buried deeply and entrenched

Internalized stigma often shows up in self-devaluing attitudes and actions, shame, not trying to take care of oneself or best interests, and expressions of worthlessness, hopelessness, and futility

It is often intertwined with anticipated stigma and other effects of being stigmatized by others

Dislodging or eroding internalized stigma is very doable but takes considerable deliberate effort.

Both Anticipated & Internalized Stigma impact Justice-involved Veterans and those who work with them.

For example, VJP Specialists must make strategic decisions about not provoking stigmatization, such as when advocating for a justice-involved Veteran to access to a certain program or service. They work to minimizing their own, and Veterans', exposure to stigma without compromising their work or engaging in avoidance that unhealthy or counter-productive.

- Anyone working in environments that undervalue or denigrate them or their work is at risk of internalizing these messages and coming to devalue themselves.
- Anyone working with Veterans who are affected by Anticipated and/or Internalized stigma needs to be aware that Veterans' stress around these issues can "rub off" and substantially impact the worker's stress.

Several practical strategies can help

1. **Slow down a moment:** Don't let reflexive thoughts, assumptions, or feelings dictate your decisions.
2. **Reflect** on your feelings or impulse: Where is it coming from? What do you think of it?
3. **Consciously consider** your reactions, goals, and options – rather than just reacting reflexively.
4. **Assess:** What specifically are you worried will happen? What do you have the urge to avoid? What parts are realistic or sensible or likely? What parts are far-fetched? What is unknown?
5. **Reassure and Remind yourself / the Veteran:**
 - a. Each person has value and potential, no exceptions. All deserve respect and dignity.
 - b. Others' judgments and stereotypes reveal their ignorance or insecurity, nothing about you.
 - c. What is unknown offers the possibility of a better situation than we fear.
 - d. One can usually do some things to increase the possibility of a positive situation. Such things don't guarantee positive results, but they are usually worth doing.
 - e. Internalized negative messages are not your fault, but you can push them out of your thinking by reminding yourself of their inaccuracy and your own strengths and values.
 - f. Don't waste energy on things you have no influence in. We cannot control others' behavior.
6. **Consciously decide what you think and your course of action.**
 - a. Each person can decide where to focus their thinking and what thoughts to push away. Doing so really does change one's view of a situation, one's feelings, and actions.
 - b. Consciously using your best reasoning and information to decide a course of action, rather than just reacting, can help you stay strong and make decisions that serve your well-being.
 - c. Stay flexible – new information may mean you want to change your decisions.
7. **Persist:** Feed your capacity to work toward your goals, acknowledging negative feelings but not letting them have control, extending self-compassion, and regrouping to try again.

NOTE that Anticipated & Internalized stigma also operate in similar ways regarding other health problems, life situations, and personal identities that are stigmatized, such as racism, sexism, mental health, homelessness, PTSD, ageism, and others.