

ACTIVITY: REASONS FOR USE — RECOGNIZING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCE

Grade Levels: 9–12

Activity Overview:

Students discuss reasons for cannabis use—including use for recreational and medical purposes, and use related to a cannabis use disorder—explore the concept of substance use stigma and investigate substance use stigma often seen in the media.

Materials:

- Piece of paper (one per student)
- Writing utensil (one per student)
- [Investigate Substance Use Stigma Worksheet](#) (one per student)



Activity Description

Part 1: Reasons for Cannabis Use

- Tell students you will be exploring reasons why people may choose to use cannabis. Start by asking the question: “Why might someone use cannabis?”
- Walk students through the following brainstorming activity:
 - On your own piece of paper, write down one reason why someone might use cannabis.
 - Pass your sheet to your neighbour and read the reason written on the one you receive.
 - On this new sheet, write a new reason someone might use cannabis (different from what’s already there).
 - Pass this sheet to your neighbour, and read the reasons written on the one you receive.
 - Continue this process, each time writing down a reason that’s not yet included on the sheet you receive.
 - After at least 10 rounds or when you get your own sheet back, take up the results as a group and record the reasons somewhere everyone can see them (blackboard, whiteboard, chart paper).
 - Have one student read out a reason on their sheet and everyone else with the same reason crossing it off theirs. Continue this until all unique reasons have been read out loud and recorded.
- If not already included in the brainstorm list, add “to cope with medical conditions” and “addiction / cannabis use disorder.”

- As a full class, discuss what you notice about the reasons for use. Project the [Substance Use Spectrum](#) for everyone to see, and discuss how the brainstormed reasons for use align with different types of use on the spectrum (beneficial use, lower-risk use, higher-risk use, substance use disorder).

Note regarding cannabis use for medical purposes

The goal of this activity is to help students critically reflect on the assumptions they make about the reasons someone might be using substances in an effort to reduce stigma. At that same time, there may be misinformation among the group about how effective cannabis is for treating various types of health conditions. Here is some helpful information to support discussion:

- [Medical Use of Cannabis and Cannabinoids](#)
- [What does research say about treating medical conditions with cannabis and cannabinoids?](#)

Part 2: Understanding Stigma

- Watch a video about substance use stigma, such as: [Understanding Stigma](#) (0:40 to 9:30).
Note: You can browse other videos about stigma to find one that's appropriate for your class: [Stigma Gallery — Health Canada Experiences](#).
- As a full class, discuss how stigma is related to cannabis use.
 - What kinds of assumptions or judgments might some people make about those who use cannabis?
 - What kinds of misunderstandings might exist related to the reasons why people use cannabis (for example, people might not realize people are using for medical reasons or because they have a cannabis use disorder or experience addiction).
 - How might stigma around cannabis use have a negative effect on people who use cannabis?

Part 3: Investigating Stigma

- Hand out the Investigating [Substance Use Stigma Worksheet](#).
- Explain that students are going to identify a piece of media and investigate whether and how substance use stigma shows up.
- Discuss the questions and where to find media sources for the assignment (newspaper, online news sources, social media, movies, TV shows, etc.).
- Decide how the students will report back on their investigations (presentations in class, written assignment, pair and share, etc.) and set a future deadline to have it completed.



Inclusion Considerations

- **Content:** Acknowledge that some groups of people experience more stigma than others and may experience layered or intersectional stigma because of different aspects of their identity (for example, being racialized and being unhoused); there are differences between groups and cultures on the acceptance of cannabis use, including cannabis use for medical and non-medical (recreational) purposes.
- **Activity Format:** Encourage students to find a piece of media in a format that is accessible to them (visual, print, audio, etc.).



Reflection Questions

1. Knowing what you know now about reasons for using cannabis and substance use disorder, are there any assumptions or misconceptions you've held about people who use substances? (E.g., it's their choice, they're just doing it for fun, they could stop if they wanted.)
2. What are some changes you could make to the words you use to help reduce substance use stigma when talking about cannabis or other substances? (E.g., replace "stoner" with "someone who uses cannabis" or "addict" with "a person with a substance use disorder.")
3. What are some things to keep in mind when you hear that someone is using cannabis? (E.g., there are different reasons for use, we should avoid making assumptions about other people's substance use, it's important not to judge or stigmatize a person for using substances.)

Stigma around substance use is one of the biggest barriers for people seeking and receiving treatment for substance use disorders. Educating students about stigma can encourage them to be active participants in their community to reduce stigma and address substance use challenges with respect and compassion.

Activity: Investigating Substance Use in the Media**Part 1: Initial Observation**

1. Title of the piece (news article, movie, TV show, etc.):

2. Who created the piece (journalist, filmmaker, studio, etc.)?

3. Short summary (3–5 sentences):

Part 2: Framing and Representation

4. How are people who use substances portrayed (dangerous, struggling, criminal, sick, helpless, resilient, etc.)?

5. What tone does the piece use (e.g., fearful, sympathetic, neutral, blaming)?

6. Are there stereotypes present? If so, what are they, and how might they reinforce stigma?

7. Does the piece include diverse voices and perspectives (e.g., if it's a news article, are people with lived experience heard from or just spoken about)?

Part 3: Stigma Analysis

8. Identify one or more examples of stigma in the piece. What words, images or messages are used?

9. Does the piece differentiate between substance use and substance use disorder? How does that affect how the audience might perceive the issue?

10. What societal factors (e.g., poverty, trauma, mental health, racism) are or aren't considered in the portrayal of substance use?

Part 4: Reflection

11. What impact could this portrayal have on how society views people who use substances?

12. If you could interview the creators of this piece, what would you ask them?

13. How might the story be told differently to reduce stigma while still being honest?
