

Stereotypes shackle recovering drug users

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Recovering drug addicts are often impaired socially.
Credit: University of Queensland

Negative stereotypes about injecting drug-users may be hampering their recovery.

A study led by University of Queensland School of Psychology researcher Dr Courtney von Hippel found that recovering drug addicts who believe they are the target of stereotypes find it harder to function within society.

"People with a history of drug abuse are often regarded as irresponsible, unreliable and less trustworthy," Dr von Hippel said.

"This societal disapproval can result in feelings of '[stereotype threat](#)', or the belief that they're the target of demeaning stereotypes.

"Stereotype threat can have a detrimental effect on performance, with the ironic consequence that targets of stereotypes can confirm the very stereotype they are trying to deny.

"People need only be concerned that others are stereotyping them for the stereotype to bring about its own reality."

Dr von Hippel and her research team studied 80

people from a methadone outpatient program.

"Participants who reported high levels of stereotype threat in relation to their drug history also reported poorer social function," Dr von Hippel said.

"Not surprisingly, we found that people on methadone maintenance had significantly poorer mental health and social functioning compared to a demographically matched control group.

"Effective social functioning, such as independent living and the ability to successfully engage in social interactions and activities, represents a major part of recovery and is also a good predictor of retention in methadone maintenance programs."

Dr von Hippel said the study's findings suggested that stereotype threat could help explain the impaired [social functioning](#) recovering [drug addicts](#) often experienced.

"We hope that examining the effects of stereotype threat could help in the development of appropriate treatment and intervention," she said.

The research was conducted in collaboration with Professor Julie Henry of UQ, and Dr Gill Terrett, Dr Kimberly Mercuri, Ms Karen McAlear and Professor Peter Rendell of the Australian Catholic University.

The study is published in the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*.

More information: Courtney von Hippel et al. Stereotype threat and social function in opioid substitution therapy patients, *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/bjc.12128](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12128)

Provided by University of Queensland

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