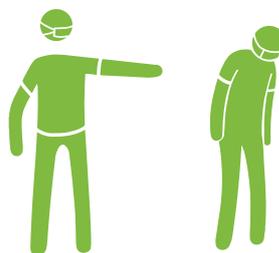


# Addressing Social Stigma and Discrimination during COVID-19

## A Guide for Professionals working with People Living with HIV



This handout briefly explains the what, why, who and how of stigma and discrimination in the context of COVID-19 and HIV. It also describes ways to address stigma and discrimination; and providing communication and psychological support to those who are vulnerable and affected by stigma. The handout is specifically meant for professionals and service providers working with People living with HIV (PLHIV).



### Stigma and Discrimination

#### What is Social Stigma?

Social stigma is the negative association between a person/ group of people who share certain characteristics and a specific disease. It involves any kind of bias, prejudice or discrimination against a person or a community based on certain characteristics during public health emergencies or a pandemic like novel corona virus (nCoV) or Corona Virus Disease (COVID)-19. Stigma may result into discrimination, stereotyping, social isolation and separate treatment of people/communities because of a perceived link with a disease.

## Stigma in the Context of HIV and COVID-19

HIV is one of the most stigmatised public health concern. Stigma stems from a society that is judgemental about sex and sexual practices.

PLHIV due to their pre-existing health conditions are at risk of nCoV because of this they may experience fear and distress. They are also vulnerable to stigma and discrimination which may increase during nCoV epidemic.

Professionals working with PLHIV must know about risks of fear and stigma posed by nCoV epidemic and ways to manage them.

### Causes of Stigma

1



- Fear is a key underlying factor which causes anger, frustration and resentment. Fear could be of
- contracting disease/ infection
  - isolation
  - being stigmatised by the community
  - losing one's job
  - failing health care system
  - absence of vaccine
  - infecting one's family and loved ones
  - death

2



- Misconceptions and rumours
- Virus attacks only old people and spares young and children
  - It spreads through pets
  - Use of mouthwash, cigarettes, and liquor can kill virus

3



- Overload of contradictory information from multiple sources creating confusion and fear



### Reactions leading to Stigma

Owing to above mentioned causes people's behaviour and reactions can lead to stigma and discrimination. The common ones are listed below.

- People who have contracted the infection, their families and communities are spreaders and carriers, therefore should be isolated
- Health workers, volunteers and local staff are carriers and hence not welcome in families and communities
- Food and other items are contaminated, will spread the virus thus, stigmatisation of essential service providers
- Fear and mistrust in public health system hindering people from seeking medical help and support of volunteers and causing threats or acts of violence

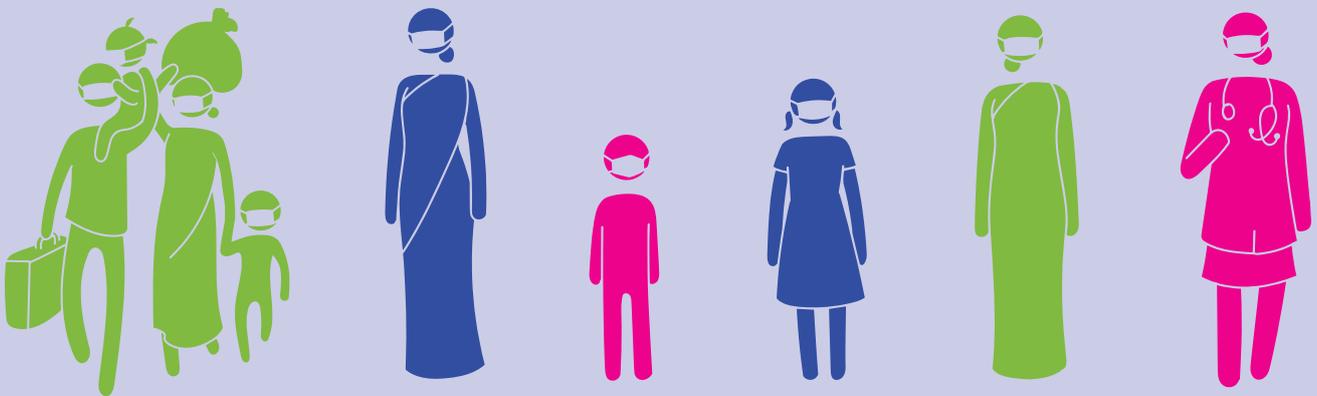


## Multiple Effects of Stigma

Impact of social stigma can be diverse and can

- prompt people to hide the illness for fear of discrimination
- prevent people from seeking health care immediately and impacts the management and prevention of disease, this can particularly be problematic for PLHIV who may not be able to access antiretroviral therapy (ART) and counselling services
- result in increased sense of emotional isolation, feeling of guilt and anxiety
- lead to lack of self-esteem and confidence
- negatively affects those with the disease, as well as their caregivers, family, friends and communities

## Groups Vulnerable to Stigma and Discrimination



Certain groups are more vulnerable to stigma and discrimination such as

- People who have contracted the infection, their families and anyone in contact with them
- Communities and people who are stereotyped
- Ethnic or minority communities
- Women, sex workers, migrant labours and LGBT communities since they are mainly seen as powerless and hence fall easy prey to being oppressed
- Service providers like FLWs (Healthcare and sanitation workers, NGO workers, police personnel)

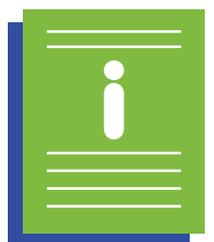
## Addressing Stigma and Discrimination

### Role of Professionals and Service Providers in Addressing Stigma

Experiences of working in the area of HIV can be used by professionals to fight stigma and discrimination during spread of nCoV.

#### 1. Disseminating correct information and dispelling myths and rumours

- Build your own knowledge about spread, control and prevention of nCoV and COVID-19 so that you feel confident about the messages you deliver
- Refer to correct and authentic information sources such as government and WHO while delivering nCoV sensitisation messages to the clients, their families and communities
- Promote importance of prevention, lifesaving actions, early screening and treatment
- Identify rumours, misconceptions and myths and dispel them through facts and correct information such as COVID-19 being treatable with high recovery rate





## 2. Engaging with and supporting individuals and groups

- While engaging with individuals and communities, understand their risks, needs and fears and accordingly provide counselling and psychological support to them
- Maintain confidentiality of affected individuals and groups
- Link them with health, relief and support services such as helpline for nCoV and share information on videos/resources available on MoHFW's website
- Share sympathetic stories that humanise the experiences and struggles of affected individuals or groups
- Stress upon the need to help and support people and families in distress among communities
- Emphasise on fighting against the virus and not those affected by them
- Promote kindness, solidarity, compassion

## 3. Build trust in the health care system

- Create a sense of safety and trust in efficacy of public health care and responders
- Promote support and encouragement for health care workers, volunteers, community leaders at the frontline

## Communicating Effectively and Sensitive

Effective and sensitive communication enables professionals working with PLHIV to allay people's fears and thereby prevent stigma and discrimination.

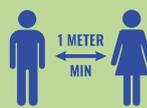
### Key Messages

For effective communication on COVID-19, professionals must deliver accurate and clear COVID specific and COVID sensitive messages.

**COVID specific messages** are those messages that directly relate to control and prevention of COVID-19. Key COVID specific messages include:



Wash your hands frequently with soap and water after sneezing and coughing, touching surfaces, before and after meal



Maintain at least 1 meter distance in market places, medical stores, hospitals, etc.



Cover your mouth with handkerchief/tissue while coughing and sneezing, wash used handkerchief thoroughly and dispose of tissue in a covered bin immediately after use



Avoid participating in large gatherings



Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth



Self monitor your health and contact a doctor immediately if you have cough, fever or breathing difficulty



Use mask while stepping out



If you have these signs/symptoms please call State helpline number or Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's 24X7 helpline at 011-23978046

**COVID sensitive messages** relate to maintenance of overall health and well-being, preventing stigma and discrimination and supporting those who are in distress during COVID-19. Key COVID sensitive messages for PLHIV include

	Continue antiretroviral therapy (ART) to maintain health and immunity
	Follow healthy diet and lifestyle including exercise
	Access counselling or tele-counselling services

### Busting Common Myths around COVID-19

	Can virus spread through flies?	COVID-19 IS NOT transmitted through houseflies
	Can regularly rinsing nose with saline help prevent COVID-19?	No. There is no evidence that regularly rinsing the nose with saline has protected people from COVID-19
	Can hot weather stop spread of corona virus?	From the evidence so far, the COVID-19 virus can be transmitted in ALL AREAS, including areas with hot and humid weather
	Can exposure to the sun or to temperatures higher than 25°C degrees prevent or cure COVID-19?	Exposing yourself to the sun or to temperatures higher than 25°C degrees DOES NOT prevent nor cure COVID-19
	Does drinking black tea prevent spread of corona virus?	There is currently no evidence to prove that black tea or other liquids can prevent corona virus
	Does putting pepper in soup prevent spread of coronavirus?	Adding pepper to your meals does not prevent or cure COVID-19

	Does spraying bleach or disinfectant on body prevent spread of corona virus?	No. Spraying or introducing bleach or another disinfectant into your body <b>WILL NOT</b> protect you against COVID-19 and can be dangerous
	Can drinking alcohol prevent or cure COVID-19?	No. Drinking methanol, ethanol or bleach <b>DOES NOT</b> prevent or cure COVID-19 and can be extremely dangerous
	Are there currently any medicines to treat COVID-19?	There are currently no drugs licensed for the treatment or prevention of COVID-19
	Are there any specific foods which I should eat to prevent contracting COVID-19?	No. There is no evidence that a particular food can prevent the disease but to maintain your health and well-being you should eat a well-balanced diet and exercise at home regularly

### Use of Correct Vocabulary

Choose words and vocabulary wisely. Avoid using words which could further stigmatise those affected and/or vulnerable. Some examples are given below.



#### PROBLEMATIC VOCABULARY

**COVID-19 cases**

**COVID-19 victims**

**COVID-19 suspects/suspected cases**

**People "transmitting COVID-19" / "infecting others"**



#### PREFERRED VOCABULARY

**People affected with COVID-19**

**People being treated for COVID-19**

**People recovering from COVID-19**

**People who died after contracting COVID-19**

**People who may have COVID-19**

**People affected with COVID-19**

## Things to remember



- Communicate in a supportive way talking to people affected by nCoV as they may be scared and mistrustful
- Talk positively and emphasise the effectiveness of prevention and treatment measures
- Add humour to conversation, encourage and guide people
- Use phrases that convey empathy such as I understand your concerns ... , You have the right to be (sad, angry ...) .... , I hear what you are saying ...
- When interacting consider and acknowledge the needs of every person and group
  - ◆ Age, as children need things explained in simpler language
  - ◆ Gender e.g. women may prefer to talk to women and men to men
  - ◆ Culture e.g. some groups may prefer not to hold eye contact
  - ◆ Faith e.g. when people need to pray or what they can eat
  - ◆ Needs and disabilities where assistance may be required

## Psychosocial Support

Since PLHIV and other vulnerable groups may experience stigma and associated negative stress providing psychosocial support to them is critical. Such support outside or local protects or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental health condition' is during nCoV pandemic.

### Key Messages for positive coping with stress

Some of the key messages that can be communicated to extend psychosocial support include



It is normal to feel sad, distressed, worried, confused, scared or angry during a crisis



Talk to people you trust



Use stress management techniques through physical relaxation techniques



Draw on skills that you have used in the past during difficult times to manage your emotions during this outbreak



If you must stay at home, maintain a healthy lifestyle (including a proper diet, sleep, exercise and social contact with loved ones at home)



Practice self-care read a book, listen to music and meditate



Stay socially connected while keeping physical distance call a friend, video chat with family



Foster family time keep a routine, make art, plan activities you can do together



Set realistic goals like writing a diary or learning new skills



Don't use tobacco, alcohol or other drugs to cope with your emotions



Decrease the time you and your family spend watching or listening to upsetting media coverage



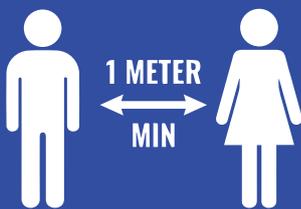
If you feel overwhelmed, talk to a counsellor, health worker, social worker or a similar professional, or another trusted person in your community. For more information contact NIMHANS helpline - 8046110007 and for children contact 1098

## Precautions for Professionals and Service Providers

Professionals and service providers are also at risk of COVID-19. They must take care and precautions to protect themselves from the infection. These are the key precautions which must be followed.



During face-to-face interactions with individuals, groups and communities wear mask



Maintain a distance of 1 metre from others



Frequently wash or sanitize hands

#TogetherAgainstCOVID19