Participating in 12-step support groups while undergoing medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder: a qualitative study of individuals’ experiences with stigma

Rachel Totaram, M.H.A., Olivia Randall-Kosich, B.S., Brianna Alex, B.S., Barbara Andraka-Christou, J.D., Ph.D.

Purpose: To understand how stigma related to medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use disorder is operationalized in 12-step peer support groups and how individuals respond to stigma. Despite MAT’s efficacy, previous studies suggest that MAT-related stigma is common in 12-step support groups, but more information is needed about its operationalization and responses.

Methods: Individuals in OUD recovery were recruited through snow-ball sampling for phone interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed. We then created a codebook based on preliminary screening of transcripts and the research question in Dedoose software. We tested codebook reliability, adjusting codes as needed. Next, we independently coded transcripts to identify meaningful data, adding new categories in the process. We resolved discrepancies through negotiation. Finally, we analyzed coded text for themes.

Results: We recruited 35 participants from 11 states: 86% had 12-step group experience; and 88% had MAT experience. Participants frequently expressed a desire for simultaneous MAT and 12-step group participation but commonly experienced stigma. Stigma was expressed by preventing individuals in MAT from speaking at meetings, refusing to sponsor them, forbidding them from claiming “clean time,” and pressuring them MAT. Stigma differs by geographic area and specific group. Responses to stigma included hiding MAT status, “taking what you need and leaving the rest,” feeling shame or anger, and seeking new groups. Many participants want new 12-step groups formed that are explicitly open to MAT.

Conclusion: Many individuals desire simultaneous participation in MAT and 12-step groups but experience MAT-related stigma. New pro-MAT 12-step groups may be needed.