

“Any Questions?” Podcast Transcript

Episode 14 : Coping with STI Stigma

[Jazzy Instrumental Intro Music]

Madeleine: Welcome to this season of Any Questions where peers from the University Health Center discuss various wellness topics that affect college life. This season you’ll be hearing from Demi and Jerry who will be kicking things off with a conversation about STIs and Stigma.

Demi: Welcome to Any Questions, a University of Maryland podcast by students, for students. I’m Demi, and my pronouns are she/they. I currently work as an HPWS Peer Influencer.

Jerry: And I’m Jerry, I use He/him pronouns and I am also a HPWS Peer Influencer, and today our conversation will be about the feelings surrounding STIs and STI Stigma!

Demi: Are STIs serious? Why do they have such a negative stigma surrounding them? What actually are STIs and what can we do about them? We’ll be addressing all of these questions and much more in this episode of Any Questions when we talk about: Coping with STI Stigma!

Jerry: The “dreaded” 3 letters, STI. By now you’ve probably heard of them and probably not in a positive way. Whether it be through a friend coming to you with a panicked self-diagnosis, or possibly through your own stint on quasi-medical sites. But even if you haven’t had personal experiences with them, you’ve probably heard of them as the butt of a joke or even a taboo, like something shameful and shouldn’t be talked about at all. All of these negative judgements warp the perception of what STIs actually are: Sexually Transmitted Infections.

Demi: Ok, so let’s talk about the different types of STIs and how they are transmitted to help spread some proper information about this usually hush-hush subject matter.

Jerry: For, sure. First it’s important to note that STIs are typically transmitted via sexual contact, but some STIs like HIV can be transmitted through needle sharing, or passed from mother to child through vaginal childbirth or breastmilk.

Demi: And STIs can be placed into three different categories: parasitic, bacterial, and viral. Parasitic STIs include pubic lice and trichomoniasis, which are both transmitted by skin-to-skin contact.

Jerry: Gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis are bacterial STIs. Gonorrhea and chlamydia are both transmitted through fluids, such as semen and vaginal secretions. Syphilis on the other hand is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact.

Demi: Last up, herpes, HPV, and HIV are all viral STIs. Herpes is transmitted via skin-to-skin contact, while HPV and HIV are transmitted through fluids.

Jerry: Now that we've reviewed the different categories, let's talk about treatable vs curable STIs. All STIs are treatable, and some can be cured. For example, STIs like gonorrhea and chlamydia can be treated with antibiotics to get rid of the infection entirely. Additionally, HIV can be treated with antiretroviral therapy, which can help control the virus.

Demi: Yeah, and with HIV we'd like to specifically acknowledge the long and complicated history of prejudice and stigma that have transpired and still have long-lasting effects to this day.

Jerry: Therefore we would like to take this time to say that if you are diagnosed with HIV, there's a good chance that with access to proper and consistent treatment, you can get to a point that your viral load is virtually undetectable, meaning that you cannot spread the virus, and no symptoms are present. While we are aware that there are many real barriers to getting and maintaining HIV treatment and health care, there are incredibly effective medications available today. More and more HIV+ people are living long and healthy lives.

Demi: Equipping yourself with the proper information can help you recognize the signs leading to an STI diagnosis and make an informed decision on how to act. Additionally, it's important in helping others through understanding and compassion if they are dealing with an STI. With the proper STI knowledge you can start to dispel the misinformation and help end the STI stigma in your own environments.

[Jazzy Instrumental Transition Music]

Jerry: So we touched on what STIs actually are, but it's important to get to the root of STI stigma to fully understand how to combat it and further normalize STIs and treatment. There is a societal contribution that can seem like it dictates the status quo on what is right and wrong. Sex is "wrong, or unclean" and STIs are punishments. However the truth is that stigmatizing health conditions only adds to a patient's burden.

Demi: For sure. Rather than focusing on seeking treatment and contacting potential exposures, there are now fears of facing judgements of peers, family, and even health care professionals that provide additional obstacles in the physical and emotional recovery process.

Jerry: STI stigma can lead to feelings of shame in patients and isolation from people and resources that can help with healing. Like we mentioned before, the distinguishing factor of STIs from any other type of infection is that they can be sexually transmitted. Recognizing why there are these negative attitudes from a perceived way of transmission, or sex shaming, is the first step into helping normalize the topics of STIs.

Demi: Additionally, STIs affect key groups of people more than others, as Dr. Jen Gunter addressed in a 2019 New York Times Article. She said:

"I suspect it is because shame and stigma are effective weapons of control that have been used throughout history to marginalize women, people of color and the L.G.B.T.Q.+ community. S.T.I.s are generally higher in these groups: a combination of biology, as

transmission to the cervix, vagina and rectum is the easiest for most S.T.I.s, and traditionally people in these groups have less access to health care because of economic marginalization or prejudice, which leads to less access to screening and treatment.”

Jerry: We should acknowledge that perpetuating these negative stigma disproportionately affects key marginalized groups and so mitigating these stressors can help alleviate their burden as well. These negative perceptions can seem like the reality when there is a consensus fueling the misinformation.

Demi: So, now that we’ve talked about stigma, let’s shift the conversation to what to keep in mind when facing STIs or STI stigma.

Jerry: There are so many different emotions that can come with an STI diagnosis, including fear, sadness, and even anger. It’s important to take some time to validate these emotions so you can start taking steps to work through them. The process can look different from person to person, but talking to your trusted support system, healthcare provider, and accessing available mental health resources can make a huge difference.

Demi: It’s also important to acknowledge the fact that you are not your diagnosis, and you aren’t alone. As mentioned earlier, STIs are more frequent than most people expect. According to the CDC, about 1 in 5 people in the United States have an STI, and in 2018 alone, there were 26 million new cases in the U.S. Of these new cases almost half were people aged 15 to 24 years old. It’s wild how prevalent STIs are among our age group and thus amongst peers and yet no one is talking about them.

Jerry: We asked Jenna Messman, UMD’s Sexual Health Program Coordinator and Human Sexuality professor, to offer some clarity on STI frequency on college campuses. According to her, “Statistically most of us have either experienced, know someone who has experienced, or know someone who is managing an STI but likely haven’t acknowledged it out loud with one another. This demonstrates the silence and shame that surrounds this subject as well as highlights opportunities for sharing our experiences and finding community and solidarity in one another.”

Demi: So, how can we directly combat STI stigma? One of the best ways to combat STI stigma is to recognize it in your daily life and take proactive steps to end it.

Jerry: Most Definitely! Be an upstander, not a bystander. Shut down misperceptions and provide proper information when you can.

Demi: Additionally, we have the ability to combat STI stigma with our own shifts in terminology. As you can probably tell by now, stigma is about perception, and thus being mindful of how we talk about sex and STIs can have a major impact on the perception surrounding STIs.

Jerry: For instance, I can admit that I, like many, never thought anything about using the word clean when getting a test back, because it has a positive connotation. Nevertheless, there is an insinuation that a positive test means unclean which is why it is important to truly think about the way your spaces talk about sex and STIs.

Demi: Yeah I totally agree, even the CDC recognizes the power of terminology and perception! Have you ever heard of the term STD? Or wondered why people say STI instead? According to the CDC, STI or Sexually Transmitted Infections sound less stigmatizing and infection seems as something that is more likely to seek treatment.

Jerry: We all want to try to contribute to a space where STIs can be talked about without judgment to give patients the most support that we can for their treatment journey.

Demi: According to Jenna Messman, “when students become empowered with information, resources, harm reduction skills, and safe places to ask questions and talk about this subject, they almost always walk away seeming motivated to enhance their own sexual health and wellness and share the information with others.”

[Jazzy Instrumental Transition Music]

Jerry: With all of this in mind, we just want to note that there’s plenty of information, testing, and treatment options available to you. Here at UMD, students have access to free STI testing through the Health Center, which on specific days and times throughout the year, is an affordable, and accessible option that operates on a first serve basis. Also, the University Health Center provides safer sex supplies, such as internal and external condoms, lube, dental dams, and so much more. These are all free, and effective ways to reduce STI transmission.

Demi: For more information on sexual health, free testing and other STI health information, you can visit the UMD health center website at health.umd.edu.

So, let’s recap. STIs typically fall into three categories - bacterial, viral, and parasitic. All STIs are treatable and most are curable. Despite these medical advancements that have been made regarding preventing, treating, and curing STIs, there’s still a lot of stigma associated with them.

Jerry: Because of their method of transmission, STIs are extremely stigmatized when compared to other types of infections. People view an STI diagnosis as a punishment for sex, which is rooted in the oppression and control of marginalized groups.

Demi: Although these thought processes are pervasive in our society, we’re here to tell you that you are not your diagnosis. Anyone can get an STI, after your first sexual experience or after your 500th, no matter how you contract an STI it doesn’t change your value as a person.

Jerry: After a diagnosis, it’s important to validate your emotions, and talk through them. Your friends, family, and medical provider care about you, and their support can be extremely helpful!

Demi: And remember, with informed, consensual, and communicative safer sex practices, your sex life can also thrive post diagnosis!

Jerry: Finally, the university offers many STI resources, including free STI testing at the Health center.

Demi: So, how can you reflect on the impact that stigma has on your outlook of STIs and help mitigate the stigma? We would like to leave you with some questions that can help:

Jerry: Do you feel comfortable going to your support system if you are worried about a possible STI?

Demi: Do you have people to talk to or provide comfort?

Jerry: Do you feel like your friends can come to you for those things, and do you feel like you can support them properly?

Demi: And with that, Thank you so much for listening, and thanks to Jenna Messman for sharing some amazing resources and information.

Madeleine: Thanks for tuning in to this episode of Any Questions. As a reminder, STI testing is available to you through the University Health Center. For more information, check out our website at health.umd.edu. Be sure to tune in next time when Demi and Jerry will be back to discuss misusing prescription stimulants aka Study Drugs. Until then, be well!

[Jazzy Instrumental Outro Music]