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## Framing Effects on Stigma and Help-Seeking

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Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

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## NPS NRP Executive Summary

Framing Effects on Stigma and Help-Seeking Messages Related to Drugs and Alcohol Misuse in the Navy

Period of Performance: 10/24/2021 – 12/31/2022

Report Date: 12/21/2022 | Project Number: NPS-FY22-N128A

Naval Postgraduate School, Department of Defense Management (DDM)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM  
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

# FRAMING EFFECTS ON STIGMA AND HELP-SEEKING MESSAGES RELATED TO DRUGS AND ALCOHOL MISUSE IN THE NAVY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Student Participation:** No students participated in this research project.

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### Project Summary

This project asked how the United States Navy could communicate more effectively with Navy personnel who may require help for drug or alcohol misuse. Communication choices, including the way messages are framed, can affect stigma and individuals' willingness to seek help, so Navy documents, websites, and individual messages should be designed strategically. To support advancement in communication about drug and alcohol misuse, this research collected experts', enlisted personnel's, and officers' perceptions of Navy communication, potential message frames, and organizational factors related to help-seeking for drug and alcohol misuse. Specific perceptions included framing effects on stigma and Navy co-workers' willingness to seek help, as well as organizational obstacles and facilitators of help-seeking.

Results indicate that formal and informal communication affects perceptions of stigma and willingness to seek help. Participants in the study reported that fear-focused themes in formal Navy communication increase stigma and decrease help-seeking, while recovery-based themes have positive effects. Informal stories about help-seekers' experiences influence others' decisions about whether to seek help, and success stories can be particularly effective in reducing stigma and encouraging people to get help. Potential message frames received higher ratings when they presented objective information or focused on positive outcomes. Men responded more positively than women to messages about performance benefits, whereas women responded more positively to messages about personal growth, caretaking, and protecting their careers. Senior officers' perceptions differed significantly from those of enlisted personnel with regard to message frames and perceived organizational support for help-seeking. The report concludes with recommendations to encourage help-seeking by Navy personnel for issues with drugs or alcohol.

**Keywords:** *stigma, help-seeking, drug misuse, drug abuse, alcohol misuse, message framing, Navy communication*

### Background

The United States' Department of Defense's (2020) Integrated Primary Prevention Policy directs the military departments to foster an environment that reduces stigma and promotes help-seeking for drugs or alcohol. Communication choices, including the way messages are framed, can affect stigma and willingness to seek help. To support advancements in communication about drugs and alcohol, this research considered the effects of message framing alongside broader influences such as organizational culture and processes in the U.S. Navy. Topics under investigation included experts', enlisted personnel's, and officers' perceptions of Navy communication, potential message frames, and organizational factors related to help-seeking for drugs and alcohol misuse. Specific perceptions included framing effects on stigma and Navy co-workers' willingness to seek help, as well as obstacles and facilitators of help-seeking.

The team interviewed 10 subject matter experts, including seven Alcohol and Drug Control Officers, one Drug and Alcohol Program Advisor, a psychologist embedded with a special warfare group, and a private practice therapist. Thirty-one volunteers completed pre-surveys about message frames and organizational issues, then participated in focus group meetings. Enlisted personnel and officers met in separate focus groups, as did men and women, to discuss these issues. A subsequent survey addressed issues raised during interviews and focus group meetings, as well as phrases excerpted from a current Navy document that provides policy and procedures related to substance misuse. The survey was answered by 63 respondents, but only 32 of them completed a significant



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number of questions. Despite this small sample size, trends and statistically significant differences in perceptions between men and women, enlisted and officers, occurred.

### Findings and Conclusions

The expert interviews provided insights into how stigma and stigmatizing language affect willingness to seek help. Language that emphasizes punishment or fear can reduce help-seeking by increasing Sailors' concerns about career derailment. Communication about confidential sources of help and potential benefits of getting help can encourage people to act. Experts further emphasized that people who seek help need clearer information about the necessary processes.

The pre-survey and focus groups indicated that people are deterred by stories about negative experiences others have had when they sought help, whereas success stories reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking. Focus group participants rated fearful themes lower than messaging about help and benefits to the individual, although a few male officers approved of the negative frames. Message themes that participants regarded positively included objective information about recognizing when someone needs help and how to seek help without negative career consequences. Follow-up survey respondents likewise preferred objective information and encouraging messages, as well as relatable examples of Navy personnel who have successfully sought treatment and gone on to accomplish their goals. Respondents further highlighted the need for the chain of command to support a healthy help-seeking culture.

Differences emerged between men and women, enlisted and officers. Officers favored family, career, and team-related message frames, while enlisted personnel emphasized more personal outcomes. Officers more commonly thought seeking help had been normalized in the Navy, whereas enlisted did not. Men responded more positively than women to messages about performance benefits, whereas women responded more positively to messages about personal growth, caretaking, and protecting their careers.

Survey respondents assessed specific passages from a Navy document about drugs and alcohol. Navy passages were rated as reducers of stigma and increasers of help-seeking when they provided information about recovery plans and ability to continue one's career. Navy statements emphasizing negative effects of substance misuse were seen to increase stigma and reduce help-seeking. Respondents identified several organizational factors that support or deter help-seeking in their work units. Concern about coworker attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors was seen as moderately deterring help-seeking. Inability to get an appointment was named as the strongest structural deterrent, and lack of time due to job demands was cited as a moderate deterrent.

Based on these findings, the following interventions are recommended:

1. Navy documents should consistently communicate about substance misuse as a treatable health problem, emphasizing potential benefits of help-seeking.
2. Share authentic, relatable, personal testimonies from people who got help.
3. Ensure that every Sailor knows how to find confidential help with minimal risk to career.
4. Design factual messages to reduce uncertainty about the process of obtaining help for drugs or alcohol.
5. Address systemic chokeholds that delay access to help.
6. Educate officers about enlisted personnel concerns and teach them necessary skills to establish a supportive culture for help-seeking.



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These recommendations could reduce stigma and increase willingness of Navy personnel to seek help. Results of this study may inform changes to language for development of OPNAV Instruction 5350.4E and future communication about help for drug and alcohol misuse.

### Recommendations for Further Research

Stigma related to substance misuse increases fear of peer ostracism, career derailment, and team exclusion. In the U.S. Navy, open discussions with designated, trained facilitators could move communities toward normalizing help-seeking. Further research is needed to identify crucial elements of such discussions, to develop discussion materials, and to create user-friendly guidance to prepare people to lead the discussions.

Education-based message framing needs to be contextualized to the dynamics of specific audiences. Despite efforts in this study to compare the interests and attitudes of discrete Navy communities, we were not able to obtain adequate participation. Future research is needed to develop strategic communication plans that could be tailored to members of distinct Navy communities.

Demographic differences impact perception and response to communication about drugs and alcohol. Officers responded more favorably to messages emphasizing family, career, and especially team. Enlisted members tended toward more individualistic themes. Women were more favorable to a variety of positive message frames than were men. The idea that ‘not every Sailor is the same’ came up several times in the discussions. Additional work is needed to fine-tune communication strategies to reach each of these distinct demographics.

A multi-faceted approach to reduce stigma and increase help-seeking would involve teaching leaders to communicate effectively about drug and alcohol misuse and to create a supportive organizational climate. Future work could develop appropriate educational materials for senior enlisted and officers, based on the current research about message framing and on best practices for training facilitators.

### References

United States Department of Defense. (2020). *DoD policy on integrated primary prevention of self-directed harm and prohibited abuse or harm* (DoD Instruction 6400.09). Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

