

## Theoretical Proposal Abstract

**Title:** Near Death: Shame and Stigma Among Survivors of Overdose

**Program of Study:** Counselor Education and Supervision, Ph.D.

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**Abstract:** This theoretical proposal is derived from the literature and intends to inform treatment and overdose response efforts for people who use drugs (PWUD). PWUD often experience stigma and shame. These are associated with fatal overdose outcomes. Stigma is part of our social identity structure. It helps limit human behavior, appearance, and performance within society. Addiction, however, is a biological issue that impairs the brain. It is not something easily hidden from public view. The review of literature confirmed that PWUD are part of a stigmatized group and are perceived negatively by first responders, healthcare workers, and law enforcement. Harm reduction (i.e., using smaller amounts of the drug, injecting slower, utilizing fentanyl test strips, etc.) is intended to decrease fatal overdose outcomes. It is also associated with stigma and negative attitudes PWUD, first responders, healthcare workers and law enforcement. Research supports a connection between stigma, shame, and overdose among PWUD. Many counselors will be a part of the abstinence-based approach to counseling someone with a substance use disorder. Others will work with individuals who choose to use drugs and may refuse sobriety. In this case, counselors will need to assess whether the client's goals for treatment include overdose prevention. If the clients do, reducing shame among this population could be an integrated component of treatment. This theoretical proposal hypothesizes that a

brief intervention aimed at lowering shame will impact harm reduction self-efficacy among PWUD and thereby yield improved health outcomes.

**Christian Worldview Integration:** Since my undergraduate degree, I have felt that serving people with substance use disorders was part of my purpose. Long after that initial calling on my heart, I became a Christian in 2015. My relationship with Jesus is intimate, wherein I can talk to Him and repent for my sinful nature. Before I gave my heart to the Lord, I felt like God was far away and inaccessible, and even if Jesus was the way, my shame was too fierce to be worthy of His love. I use this feeling to help guide my work in addiction studies research. I know what it feels like to think I am too far from God's love. Through my work, I hope to dispel stigma, reduce shame, and prepare an environment wherein PWUD can accept His gift of Jesus.

I believe counseling, teaching, supervising, and scholarly activities are part of the Divine plan to ease the suffering of others and point people toward Jesus. My Christian worldview influenced the study from the population (comprised of PWUD), the intervention (meeting people where they are), to the dissemination of this proposal at Liberty University (helping to decrease bias toward this population among Christian scholars). It is clear from the literature that stigma and shame are contributors to overdose among PWUD. I propose to present this during Research Week at Liberty University to help disseminate how stigma and attitudes toward addiction influence drug-using behaviors.

This research is impactful within the culture at large. In 2019 more than 70,000 people in the United States died from an overdose, according to the CDC (2022). Understanding how impactful shame is to overdose could be critical to saving lives. This proposal is a step in the direction of not only saving lives, but saving souls through the calling He has placed within each of us.