

Substance Abuse Stigma

Identifying & Eliminating Barriers in Recovery

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Introduction



Recovery Centers of America at Danvers is a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Massachusetts. RCA Danvers provides both inpatient and outpatient levels of care to men and women seeking help for substance abuse. During my internship at RCA, I worked on the women's unit which provides two levels of care - ATS (acute treatment services) which includes detox and CSS (clinical stabilization services) which is a 30-day program patient's may complete upon completion of ATS.

I have decided to focus my project on stigma and its negative effects on patients in recovery. Stigma is an important issue because stigma towards individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) remains a substantial barrier for those seeking appropriate treatment.

Related Literature

Medicine has long since reached the consensus that addiction is a complex brain disorder with several components. Yet, people with substance use disorder continue to be blamed for their disease. The public, and many in healthcare, continue to view it as a result of moral weakness and flawed character (NIDA, 2020).

Stigma towards individuals with SUD occurs in general society as well as in health care settings. Stigmatizing attitudes and resulting behaviors lead to suboptimal health care outcomes for these patients. These attitudes can also instill feelings of shame in these patients, leading to a mistrust of providers and an avoidance of health care encounters altogether (Dell Medical School, 2020).

Stigma creates challenges which magnify the risks of patient harm by compromising access to necessary substance abuse treatment, reducing patient empowerment, lowering adherence to treatment plans, and diminishing treatment outcomes (Atkins et al, 2020).

Objectives

The first objective of this project was to identify how patients in recovery perceive stigma. The second objective was to learn how patients have dealt with stigma in the past. The third and final objective was to identify how staff at RCA can help patients overcome the negative effects and barriers that stigma presents to recovery.

Materials and Methods

WAHL survey - Clinical psychologist Otto F Wahl PhD. originally designed to measure stigma regarding mental health. Jason Luoma PhD adapted and repurposed to measure stigma regarding substance abuse.

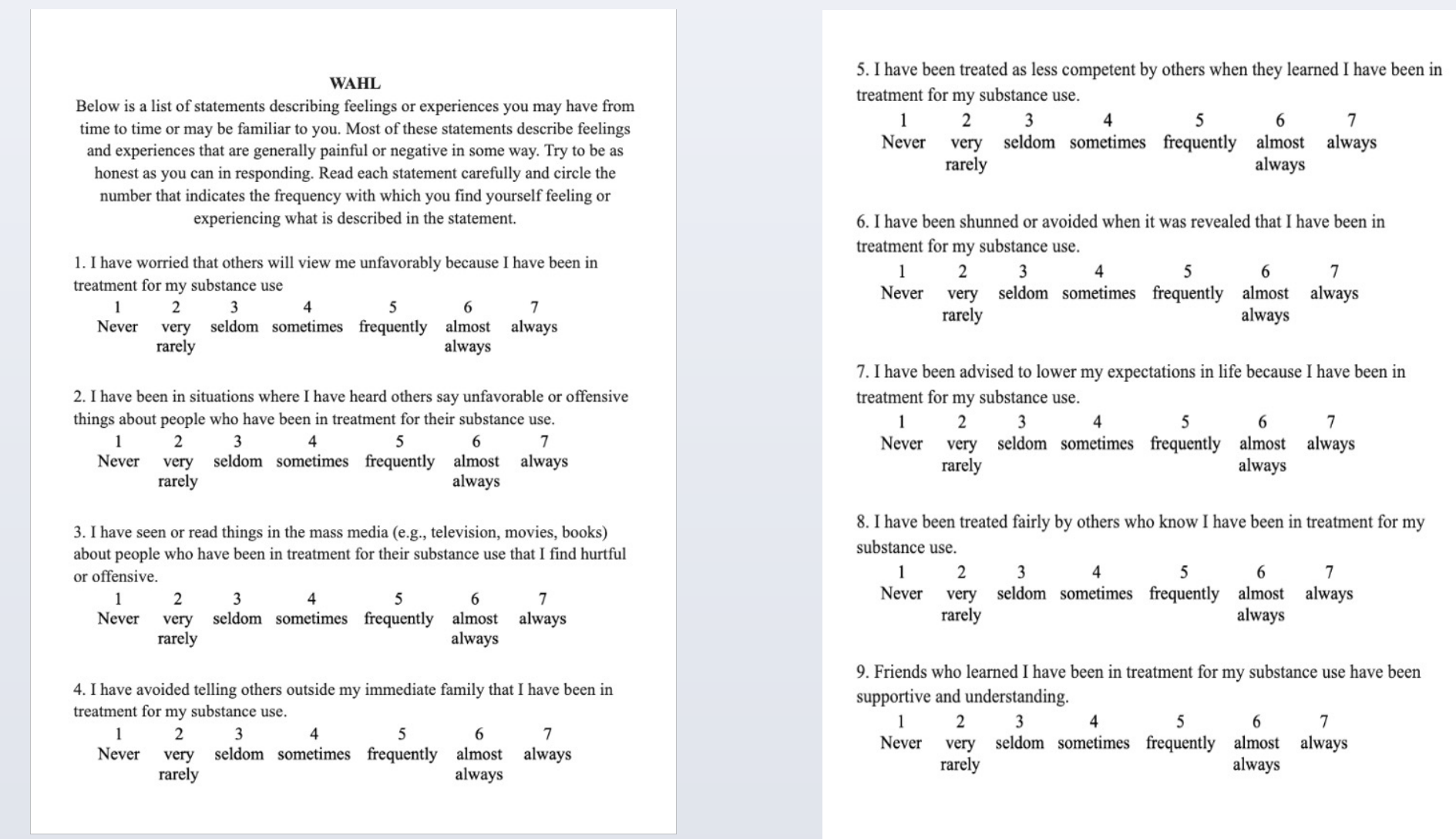


Figure 1 WAHL survey
PSAS survey - Perceived stigma of substance abuse scale.

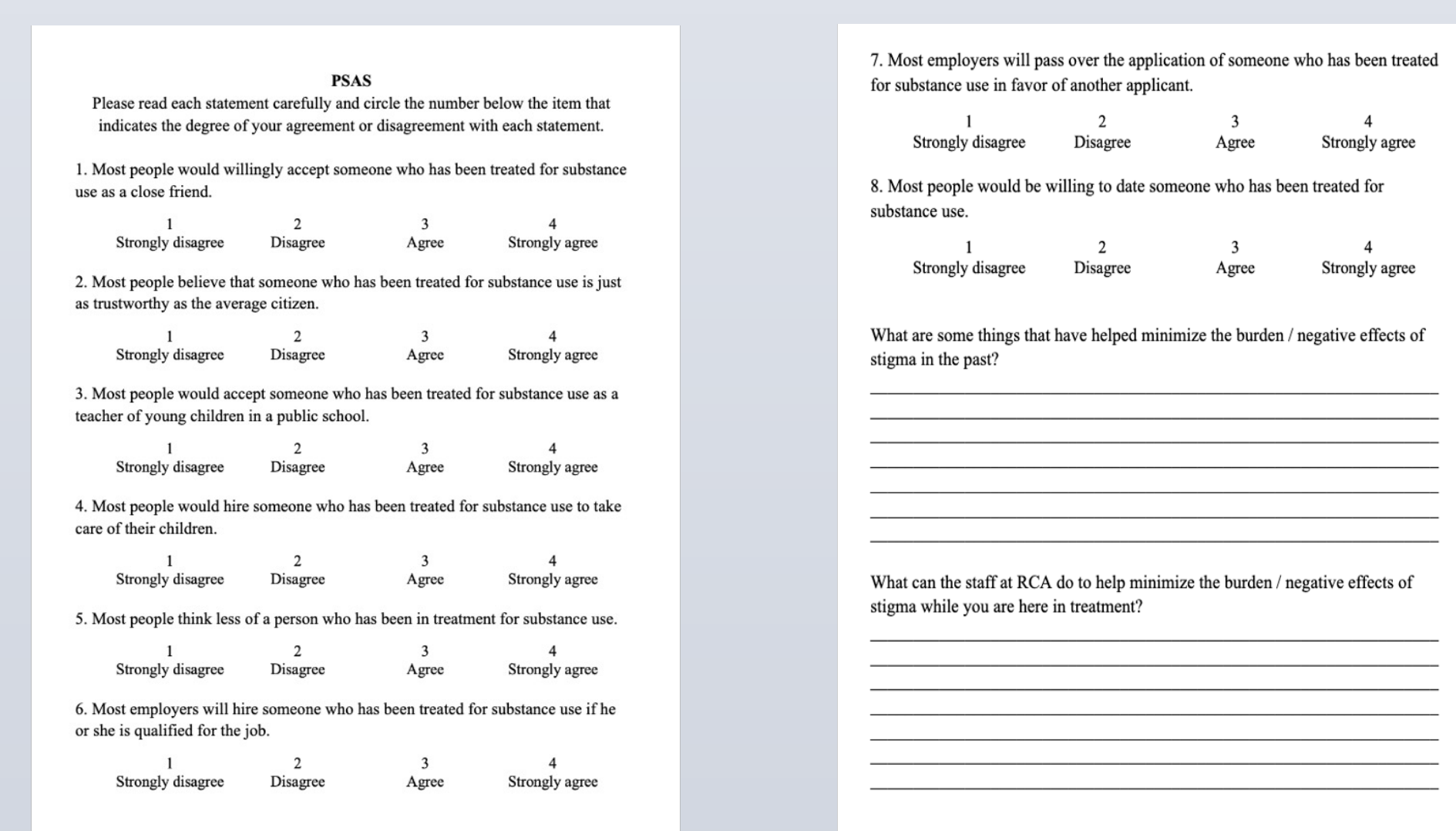


Figure 2 PSAS survey

I ran a group on stigma with 15 women aged 18 to 60

At the conclusion of the group, I asked participants to fill out two surveys to measure patient experiences regarding stigma

I recorded the results and presented my findings to the clinical team on Unit 1

Results

Dispersed data indicates that there is a wide range when it comes to perception and experience regarding stigma.

80% of respondents feel they will be thought less of because they've received treatment for substance use.

Patients expressed they would like to have a group focused on stigma. - 8 out of 11 (73%) open responses mentioned having a stigma focused group.

Patients report a wide range of ways they have dealt with stigma in the past from pretending and denial, to honest and open communication.

A few patients said what has helped them in the past has been educating others on the reality of the disease.

- This includes having a solid understanding of the mechanisms of addiction as a **disease** and being able to relay that information to hopefully respondent and open-minded people.

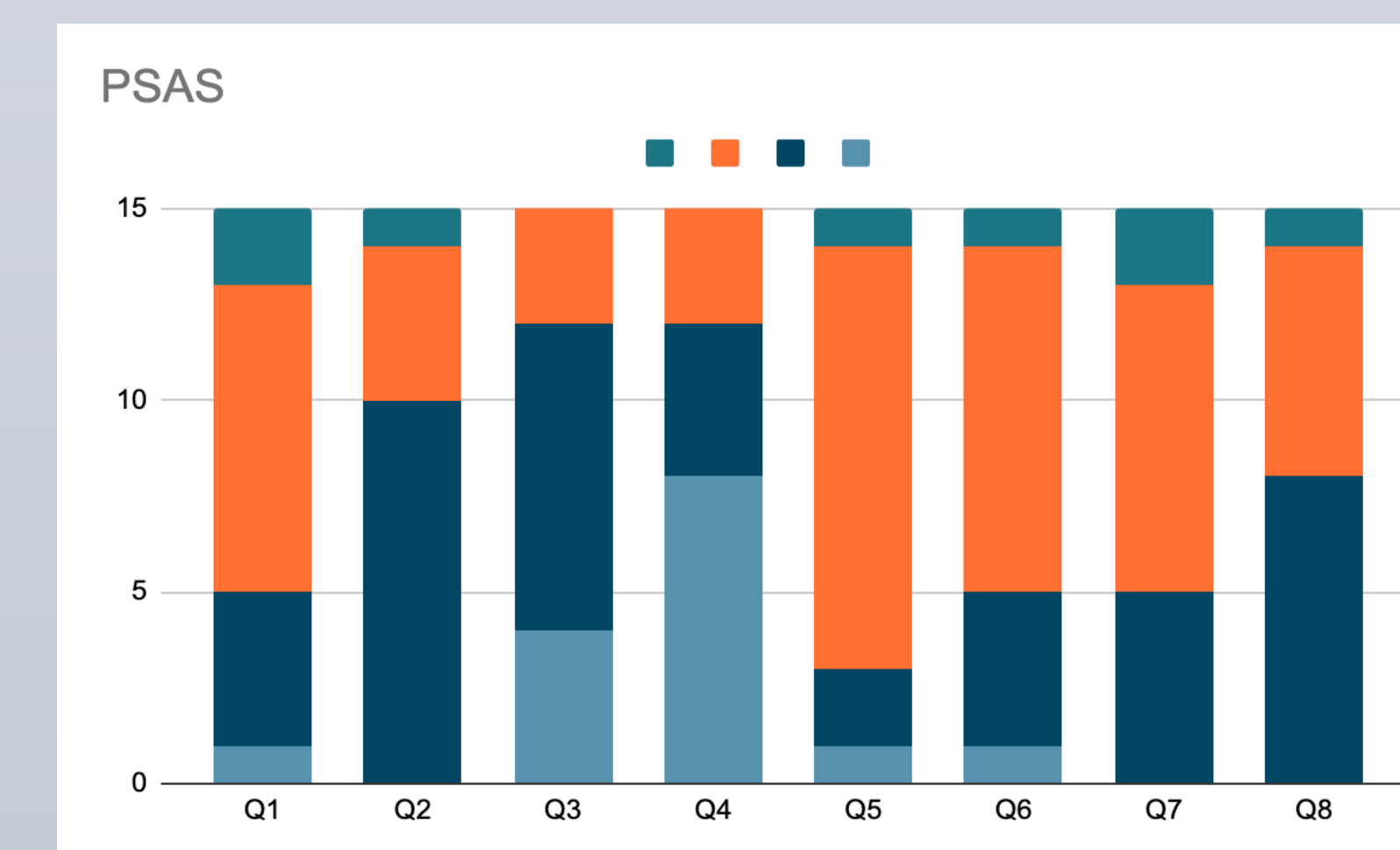


Figure 3 Responses to the PSAS survey indicates a wide range of responses

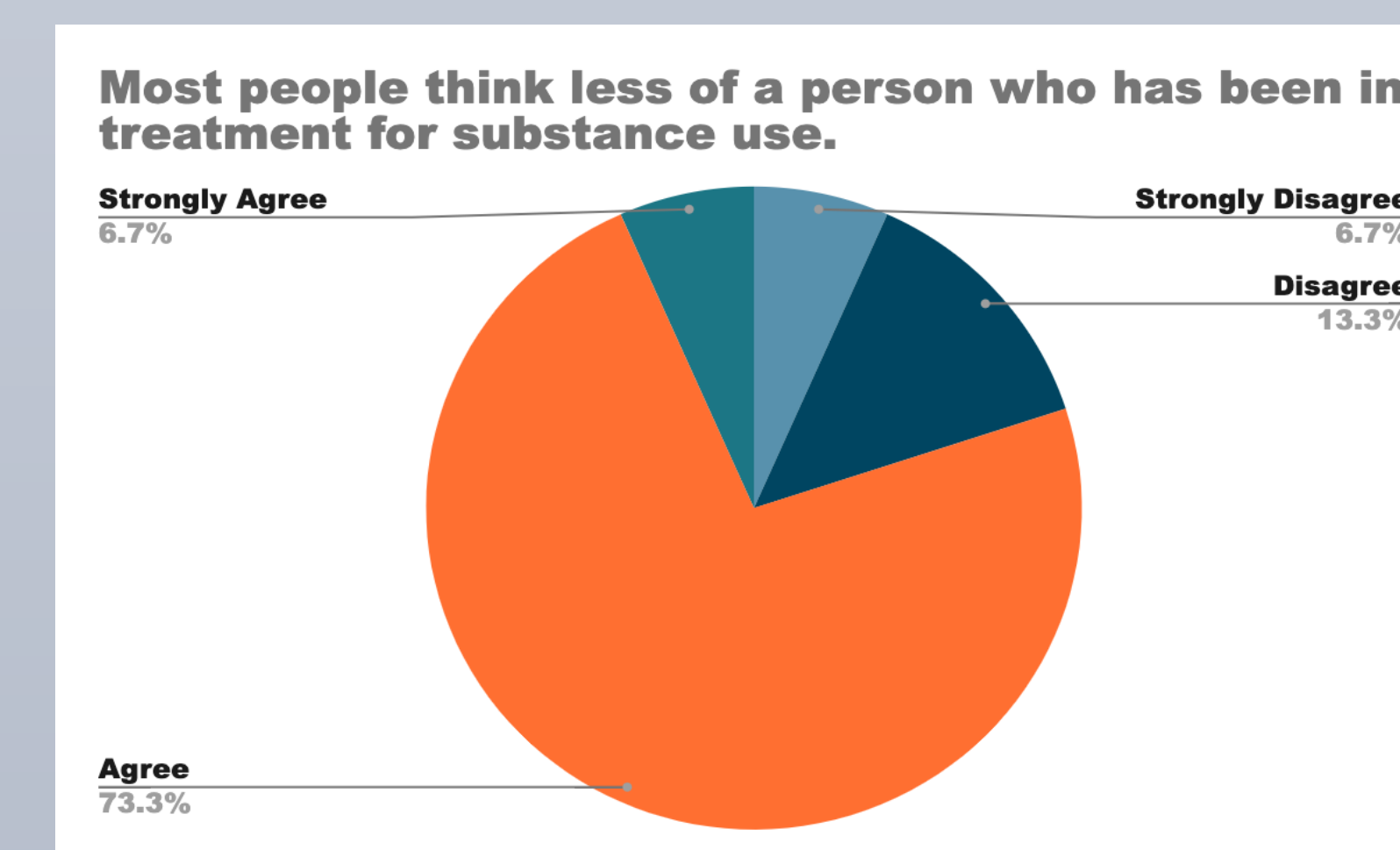


Figure 4 80% of respondents indicated that they feel they will be thought less of because they have received treatment for substance abuse

Conclusions

While each individual experiences and perceives stigma in their own way, there are some overlapping trends.

The two most pertinent themes were trust and respect.

- Patients feel as though they are not being deemed as trustworthy. These feelings of distrust work against their recovery.
- Patients feel more encouraged to share their experiences with stigma when staff validates what they are saying, and also when staff share their own experiences.

Staff at RCA were open and receptive to the information and results presented to them.

Having a better understanding of how patients perceive and experience stigma will aid them in their ability to provide the best possible care and support while they are in treatment at RCA.

References

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