

Debt stigma

About StepChange

StepChange are a registered charity giving free and non-judgemental debt advice and support to people across the UK. Since 1993, we have helped more than 7.5 million people with debt problems take back control of their finances and their lives.

Summary

"It's embarrassing, stressful and made me feel like I had somehow failed at life and had been irresponsible"

Debt is a normal part of life, but many people struggle to talk about financial difficulties. Unexpected life events — such as job loss, ill health and relationship breakdown — are common reasons for people needing debt advice. The cost of living is also a significant factor in the financial struggles of StepChange clients, as it can lead to increased debt and hardship. Economic abuse can also have a devastating impact on someone's ability to take control of their financial situation.

These circumstances are often beyond an individual's control, yet debt is frequently and unfairly seen as a result of poor money management. Societal stigma and shame prevent many from seeking help early, leaving them to struggle alone.

Many clients say they wish they had sought support sooner and said they experienced their first good night's sleep once they did.

Some myth-busters...

- *"Lots of people are worse off"* – **Debt is common** – 1 in 2 of us will face a debt-related challenge in our lives!
- *"Why don't you plan your spending better?"* **Stigma keeps people silent** – Almost half (44%) of people struggling with debt tell no-one
- *"Just stop spending"* – **Judgement fuels shame** – Nearly 60% of people in debt feel others assume they are irresponsible, reinforcing stigma and discouraging them from seeking help.

Continued overleaf...

Why is tackling stigma important?

"I felt like a complete failure...like the world was against me"

At a time where 4.5 million in the UK are in financial difficulty, access to free, impartial and high-quality debt advice is more important than ever.

- Half of people (50%) struggling with debt wait over a year before seeking helpⁱ
- Stigma stops people from getting help and means debt problems get worse before they get better, exposing people to crisis and harmful bailiff enforcement
- Stigma prevents those experiencing coerced debt, a form of economic abuse, from seeking help. Our research shows that shame and embarrassment were the most commonly reported obstacles – nearly half of respondents (45%) felt unable to ask for help for this reasonⁱⁱⁱ
- Debt stigma harms health, relationships and work^{iv}, and undermines children's development, even leading to bullying^v

What can make a difference?

Debt advice from charity's like StepChange, offering free, impartial debt advice, support people to open up about their debt and money worries. We find out about their finances and anything else making it hard for them to manage their money. We offer budgeting tips, explore debt solutions and sign-post to other support if needed.

Our on-line, 'Digital First' approach can help people to take the first step towards seeking help, but always with an option to speak to an advisor over the phone.

How can you help?

Raise awareness about debt stigma on social media @StepChange #daw2026 and wear our Debt Awareness Week badge to PMQs and between 14–22 March. E-mail Lucy.Hooper1@stepchange to request a supporter pack or constituency leaflets.

Request a meeting with StepChange for more information about how you can help support our work, by emailing Lucy.Hooper1@stepchange.org

Become a member of the APPG on Debt and Financial Inclusion. Email James.Cleverley@stepchange.org for more information.

ⁱ Research conducted by Censuswide among a sample of 4,000 UK nationally representative general consumers aged 18+, between 13/01/2026 and 19/01/2026

ⁱⁱ *Mixed messages: [Why communications to people in financial difficulty need to offer a clearer, better route to help.](#)* StepChange and Amplified Global, September 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ *Filed away: [The experiences of victim-survivors with coerced debts during and after economic abuse.](#)* StepChange, March 2026

^{iv} *Preventing harm in consumer credit.* Research conducted by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,116 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8th – 9th May 2024.

^v *The debt trap: [exposing the impact of problem debt on children.](#)* StepChange and The Children's Society, May 2014