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Harm Reduction

Fact Sheet 2019

What is Harm Reduction?

- Harm reduction can be defined as policies, programs and practices that aim to minimize negative health, social and legal impacts associated with drug use, drug policies and drug laws.
- Harm reduction focuses on rehabilitation, and discourages risk-taking behaviours through the use of education.
- Harm reduction recognizes that not everyone is able to cease problematic behaviors right away and can have relapses. (i.e., quitting smoking, dieting, reducing caffeine and sugar intake)
- Harm reduction provides the necessary supports to reduce harms associated to encourage productive members of society and creating safer communities.[1]

Principles of Harm Reduction:

- Respecting the rights of people who use drugs.
- A commitment to evidence.
- A commitment to social justice and collaborating with networks of people who use drugs.
- The avoidance of stigma.[2]

Harm Reduction Model versus Punitive Model

- Harm reduction and abstinence models can co-exist. Each model has the primary goal of ceasing risky behaviors and a drug free world.

Harm Reduction Model	Punitive Model
• Practical approach • Cost effective and many benefits • Rehabilitation • Decriminalization • Facilitative • Human empowerment • Reduce harm associated with risk behaviours • Unconditional support • Destigmatizing • Access to community support systems – meets people where they are at	• Ideal approach, but not practical • High costs and negative consequences • Punishment-possession charges • Criminalization • Coercive • Human minimization • Cessation of risk behaviours • Conditional support • Stigmatizing • Zero tolerance- must be clean and sober to receive many support services

What are the Benefits of a Harm Reduction Approach?

- Reduces health care costs by reducing drug-related overdose, disease transmission, injury and illness, as well as hospital utilization.
- Reduces injection substance use in public places, and reduces the number of used needles in public.
- Reduces crime and increases employment among people who use substances.
- Reduces the sharing of needles and other substance use equipment.
- Educates about safer injecting and smoking and reducing the frequency of use.
- Increases referrals to treatment programs and health and social services.[6]
- Protects and improves the health of the community as a whole therefore requires protecting and improving the health of drug users. Drug users must be integrated into the community rather than isolated from it.[3]

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Why is a Harm Reduction Approach Important?

- Drug use is attributed to growing prison populations and accounts for a significant amount of police resources.
- Drug use is a significant problem in our communities.
- Global studies show that harsher drug laws appear to increase the use of injection drugs resulting in a soaring rate of infectious diseases.
- Many countries that have relied on deterrence and repression methods are now seeing an increasing rate of drug-related HIV among using populations.

Harm Reduction Strategies and Treatment Programs:

- Harm reduction reduces crime, focuses on making active changes, reduces victimization, and can turn people around by encouraging prosocial behaviours while recognizing people may not be fully ready to cease risky behaviours.
- For example, Addiction and Mental Health - Opioid Dependency Program, which provides individuals with opioid dependencies to become stabilized by reducing the illegal behaviours associated with drug seeking and providing opportunities to participate in mainstream society. [4]

[1] Harm Reduction International. (n.d.). What is harm reduction. Retrieved from https://www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction
[2] Harm Reduction International. (n.d.). What is harm reduction. Retrieved from https://www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction
[3] Health Link BC. (n.d.). Understanding harm reduction: Substance use. Retrieved from https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/substance-use-harm-reduction
[4] Inform Alberta. (n.d.). Addiction and mental health – Opioid dependency. Retrieved from https://informalberta.ca/public/service/serviceProfileStyled.do?serviceQueryId=1000286