



Introduction to Harm Reduction Concepts

Definition of Harm Reduction:

Harm Reduction refers to measures aimed at reducing the harm associated with drug use without necessarily requiring a reduction in consumption. (Alex Wodak, 1994, Australia) The following are the three key aspects of harm reduction:

- The user's decision to use drugs is accepted as a fact. This does not imply approval of the decision to use drugs. Harm reduction measures presume that for the present the user is going to continue his or her drug use, and we must accept that fact.
- The user is treated with dignity as a normal human being. By the same token, there is an expectation that the user will behave "normally," i.e. within the law. Thus, the drug user is responsible for his or her behavior.
- Harm reduction is neutral regarding the long-term goals of intervention. It does not mean that the eventual goal of a harm reduction approach might not include abstinence. Indeed, in many cases, harm reduction measures are a vital first step towards reduction of, and even cessation of, drug use. By treating the user with dignity rather than as a criminal, harm reduction programs have been successful in bringing addicts into treatment programs. Harm reduction involves a prioritization of goals, in which immediate and realizable goals take priority when dealing with users who cannot be realistically expected to cease their drug use in the near future, but it does not conflict with an eventual goal of abstinence. It is simply neutral regarding the long-term goal of intervention.

Overview of the Harm Reduction Model

- Removing judgments about drug use and users.
- Any reduction in harm is a step in the right direction.
- Drug use itself is not necessarily the problem, it may be part of the issue but it is usually just a symptom of, or coping mechanism for, and/or pain management for larger issues.
- There are as many different harm reduction strategies and plans as there are drug users and communities. Drug related harm develops through a variety of mechanisms - therefore, harm reduction must develop a wide variety of interventions.
- Quality of life and well-being are criteria for measuring success not reduction in the consumption of drugs.
- The agenda belongs to the participant and is a collaboration and exchange between the participant and the service provider – the service provider facilitates the agenda with the participant, s/he does not implement it upon the participant.

Note: This document is included within the *Supportive Services* section of CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/toolkit2. This document has been adapted from CSH's training curriculum *Successfully Housing People with Substance Use Issues*, which is available at www.csh.org/training.