



# Harm Reduction – What is it?

BRI KRAUSE, LICENSED CLINICAL ADDICTION COUNSELOR

DIRECTOR OF OPIOID TREATMENT PROGRAM, HEARTVIEW FOUNDATION

# Objectives

- ▶ Explore what harm reduction is and is not
- ▶ Learn about different examples of harm reduction
- ▶ Explore goals associated with harm reduction strategies

# Statistics

- ▶ According to the CDC, from May 2020 to April 2021: 100,000 people died of an overdose - An increase of 29% compared to the same time frame in the year prior.
- ▶ According to the CDC, More than 760,000 people have died since 1999 from a drug overdose.
- ▶ **Two out of three drug overdose deaths in 2018 involved an opioid.**
- ▶ In addition, according to the HHS, the rate of overdose fatalities has jumped 250% since 1999.
- ▶ According to the CDC, the estimated lifetime cost of treating one person living with HIV is near \$450,000.
  - ▶ Hospitalization in the US due to substance use related infections alone costs over \$700 million annually.
  - ▶ In the United States, the estimated cost of providing health care services for people living with chronic Hepatitis C infection is \$15 billion annually.

# Harm Reduction – what it is

- ▶ Harm reduction, in general, is a variety of public health policies and initiatives aimed at reducing risk associated with human behaviors, both legal and illegal, including but not limited to – substance use
- ▶ According to SAMHSA, harm reduction is:
  - ▶ An approach that emphasizes engaging directly with people who use drugs to prevent overdose and infectious disease transmission, improve the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of those served, and offer low-threshold options for accessing substance use disorder treatment and other health care services.
- ▶ Harm reduction is reducing the harm associated with using drugs through a variety of public health interventions



# Harm Reduction – what it is not

- ▶ Harm reduction does not encourage people to use drugs
  - ▶ Harm reduction recognizes that if a person is still wanting to use or engage in substance using behaviors, they will despite knowing the negative consequences
  - ▶ Harm reduction strategies give an opportunity to use in a way that provides less risk – to both the person who uses drugs or alcohol and the community – in addition to providing an opportunity for education and honest discussion without judgement
- ▶ Harm reduction does not discourage treatment involvement
  - ▶ There is a strong connection between harm reduction strategies and avenues into treatment services, ultimately, some people who use drugs are not in a space where they are ready to enter treatment, but treatment will always be an option if/when they become ready
- ▶ Harm reduction strategies/programs do not increase community risk or involvement in illegal behaviors
  - ▶ There is a lot of research over the years that suggest these programs do not promote any greater risk or involvement in illegal behaviors

# Harm Reduction – what it looks like

## Everyday examples:

- ▶ Seat belts
- ▶ Sports equipment
- ▶ Traffic signs/signals
- ▶ Sunscreen

## Substance use examples:

- ▶ Eating food/drinking water while out drinking
- ▶ Taxi vouchers from the bar
- ▶ Needle/syringe exchange programs
- ▶ Narcan distribution and training
- ▶ Fentanyl test strips
- ▶ Safe consumption sites
- ▶ Medication Assisted Treatment

# Harm Reduction - Goals

- ▶ The primary goal of harm reduction is to save lives and protect the health of both people who use drugs and their communities
- ▶ Other harm reduction objectives include decreasing the stigma associated with addiction, increasing education on safer substance use, encouraging protected sex, and connecting people who use drugs with health and social services or support groups.
- ▶ There are also overarching aims like preventing transmission of blood-borne or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), discouraging the use of shared needles or equipment, and decreasing the number of overdose deaths

▶ [What Is Harm Reduction? | Johns Hopkins | Bloomberg School of Public Health \(jhu.edu\)](#)

# Harm Reduction - Principles

- ▶ According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition, harm reduction practices have 8 principles ([Harm Reduction Principles | National Harm Reduction Coalition](#)):
  1. Accepts, for better or worse, that licit and illicit drug use is part of our world and chooses to work to minimize its harmful effects rather than simply ignore or condemn them
  2. Understands drug use as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses a continuum of behaviors from severe use to total abstinence, and acknowledges that some ways of using drugs are clearly safer than others
  3. Establishes quality of individual and community life and well-being — not necessarily cessation of all drug use — as the criteria for successful interventions and policies
  4. Calls for the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and the communities in which they live in order to assist them in reducing attendant harm



# Harm Reduction – Principles

5. Ensures that people who use drugs and those with a history of drug use routinely have a real voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them
6. Affirms people who use drugs (PWUD) themselves as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use and seeks to empower PWUD to share information and support each other in strategies which meet their actual conditions of use
7. Recognizes that the realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sex-based discrimination, and other social inequalities affect both people's vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm
8. Does not attempt to minimize or ignore the real and tragic harm and danger that can be associated with illicit drug use

# Takeaways

- ▶ Harm reduction strategies are designed to save lives!
- ▶ People are going to use if they want to, therefore, harm reduction strategies provide an opportunity to engage in that behavior with less risk
- ▶ Harm reduction strategies do not “condone” substance use, but rather recognize there are some people who use drugs who are not ready or willing to stop
- ▶ Harm reduction strategies are a path some people take to get into recovery and do not hinder recovery for those who want to obtain it

# Resources

- ▶ <https://www.cdc.gov/ssp/syringe-services-programs-summary.html>
- ▶ <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction>
- ▶ <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>
- ▶ <https://www.hhs.gov/overdose-prevention/harm-reduction>
- ▶ <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2022/what-is-harm-reduction>
- ▶ <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/opioid-crisis-statistics/index.html>