

# What is Harm Reduction

## Harm Reduction:

- **Ensures** that people who use drugs have a voice in the creation of programs that affect their lives.
- **Affirms** people who use drugs are the primary agents of change
- **Empowers** communities to share information and support each other
- Provides a **safe space** for other (mental) health concerns

## Benefits of Harm Reduction:

- Increased sense of control and self-care.
- Reduced sense of chaos associated with drug seeking behavior, increased stability.
- Reduced needle litter and debris, prostitution/survival sex, and drug related criminal activity.
- Reduced strain (eventually) on social, housing, income and employment services.

## Harm Reduction Looks Like...

- Non-judgemental, non-coercive provision of services
- Low-threshold program models (ex. No sobriety requirements)
- Long term acceptance of participants practices
- Avoidance of paternalistic tendencies

## Harm Reduction Philosophy:

- Compassionate pragmatism/come as you are/any positive change
- Recognizing the whole person, not defining someone solely by their addiction
- Don't need to know the destination to begin the recovery journey toward healing, growth and positive change.

## Many Pathways to "Healing":

- Spontaneous/natural recovery
- 12 step programs
- MAT –Medication Assisted Therapy
- Psychedelic Assisted Therapy
- Ibogaine Therapy
- Comprehensive Psychotherapy
- Medical detoxification
- Abstinence-oriented in- and outpatient rehabs

## Language of Harm Reduction:

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me" – false

- The labeling of "addiction" or "addict" can be detrimental to an individual.
- No matter where you work, your language matters. It may mean the difference between someone seeking help and not seeking help, the difference between trust and distrust.
- Language perpetuates exclusion and marginalization.
- Dignity, Identity and labels – all of these matter!
- Use a language of individualization, emancipation and liberation, not oppression and stigmatization

### **Dependence or Addiction:**

- Both short and long term opioid prescriptions for chronic pain will lead to dependence and increased tolerance (even if take exactly as prescribed), yet not necessarily an *addiction*.
- Babies can be born dependent to opioids, but aren't *addicted*.
- Dependence is the body developing tolerance to a drug and requiring higher doses to get the same effects. Experiencing physical withdrawal symptoms if the drug is withheld. Brain changing its chemistry to act "normal" when the drug is present and "abnormal" when it's not.
- Addiction is compulsive use of a drug despite negative consequences. Being unable to stop using the drug even though you want to or tried. Cravings that send the user on a search for more of the drug, despite the obstacles of obtaining it and despite the consequences taking the drug may cause.
- Dependence doesn't necessarily indicate an addiction, and an addiction doesn't necessarily indicate that a dependence has developed, but the two often occur together, particularly with opioids.
- The difference is in the behavior of the person consuming.

### **Opiate Situation:**

- 4 of 5 heroin users start with pain pills
- 85% of all overdose deaths are witnessed – this means that 85% of all overdose deaths could have been prevented.
- Age range varies widely
- Risk to children – in present, and in terms of future development
- Synthetic opiates

### **Why Overdoses May Occur:**

- Periods of abstinence (treatment, prison time, "clean" time... )
- Variations in purity levels
- Mixing with other drugs
- Using alone

### **Overdose Prevention:**

- How & Who
  - Peer based naloxone training
  - SO/Family/Community based organizations
  - Prevention information and education
  - Treatment and recovery

### **Naloxone Myths:**

- Naloxone does NOT cause physical or psychological dependence.
- Naloxone has NO EFFECTS on a person who does not use opioids
- Having naloxone available and present does NOT encourage people who use opioids to take more – NO ONE wants to overdose.