

Harm Reduction

Harm Reduction Defined

Harm reduction is an approach that aims to reduce the negative consequences associated with activities such as drug use and sex work. Harm Reduction also believes in, and respects, the rights of folks who engage in drug use and/or sex work.

Core Principles and Values

- **Minimize harm**
 - Accept that drug use/sex work is part of our world and choose to minimize its harmful effects rather than ignore or condemn them
- **Some stuff is safer than other stuff**
 - Understand drug use/sex work as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, and acknowledges that some ways of using drugs/selling sex are safer than others
- **Improve quality of life**
 - Establish quality of individual and community life and well-being – not necessarily stopping drug use/sex work – as the criteria for successful interventions and policies
- **Non-judgmental, non-coercive**
 - Call for the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources to people who use drugs and sell sex in order to assist them in reducing attendant harm
- **Center client voices**
 - Ensure that drug users, sex workers, and those with a history of drug use/sex work routinely have a real voice in the creation of programs and policies designed to serve them
- **Affirm agency**
 - Affirm drug users as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use/sex work, and seek to empower users to support each other in ways which meet their actual conditions of work
- **Systems suck**
 - Recognize that the realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, past trauma, sex-based discrimination and other social inequalities affect people's vulnerability to and capacity for effectively dealing with drug and sex-related harm
- **Risk is real**
 - Do not attempt to minimize or ignore the real and tragic harm and danger associated with licit and illicit drug use/sex work

Importance

Harm reduction was originally developed as a public health approach to drug use in the 1980's. The approach was primarily created by drug users, as well as HIV/AIDS activists and social service workers. Harm reduction was particularly important at the time because of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and the criminalization of drug users that prevented so many from accessing clean injection equipment and quality healthcare. Harm reduction incorporates a spectrum of strategies from safer use, to managed use to abstinence to meeting drug users "where they are," addressing conditions of use along with the use itself. This approach centers agency, dignity, and wellbeing of drug users. As a public health theory, it acknowledges drug use as a fact and seeks to minimize risks and dangers associated with said use.

How HIPS Implements Harm Reduction

HIPS has expanded harm reduction philosophies to include our work with sex workers as well as drug users. We believe that harm reduction can be a helpful framework for safer sex education and affirming the dignity, agency, and rights of sex workers.



Reducing harm in the nation's capital since 1993

HIPS is a harm reduction service provider and advocacy organization providing support to persons impacted by sexual exchange and/or drug use in the District of Columbia. For more information about HIPS, visit www.hips.org.