


LET'S TALK ABOUT
**HARM
REDUCTION**

HOW TO BE AN ADVOCATE FOR
HARM REDUCTION IN YOUR
COMMUNITY





If you're reading this, that means that you likely support harm reduction practices. *(If not, we very much hope this guide makes you interested in learning!)*

As a society, we are very conflicted about how we talk about and address substance use in our communities. Polarizing opinions, varying beliefs and approaches are often hot topics of debate in the media and in public spaces, where harm reduction practices are often questioned or challenged.

While we know that harm reduction works, advocating for it is a whole other challenge. Advocacy in general can be daunting and cause hesitation and anxiety, let alone when the topic is so controversial.

If you've ever felt this way, we hope this guide will help to increase your confidence in being an advocate in your community. Check out these strategies below and practice them in your personal and professional life!

DEBUNK COMMON MYTHS

Being an advocate requires us to be able to debunk common myths and stereotypes, and share accurate information.

Myth: *Harm reduction enables people to use drugs.*

Fact: Harm reduction does not promote or encourage drug use, but helps people make informed decisions for themselves. Harm reduction provides non-judgemental care and education alongside access to tools that help people stay safer.

Myth: *Harm reduction is only for people who use drugs.*

Fact: Harm reduction encompasses strategies used to reduce the harms of various behaviors or activities, not just drug use. This can include things such as riding a bike, driving a car, or getting a taxi home after going to the bar.

Myth: *Harm reduction is a band-aid solution.*

Fact: Abstinence is not realistic for everyone, and harm reduction offers alternatives. Harm reduction programs are often the first point of access to treatment and prevention resources for people who use drugs, where individuals can also access a variety of supports as well. Drug use is a complex issue that harm reduction alone cannot solve. Harm reduction is about meeting people where they are at and reducing risk.

DEBUNK COMMON MYTHS (CONT.)

Myth: *Harm reduction programs are wasting taxpayer money*

Fact: Harm reduction programs actually reduce taxpayer dollars. For example, 'Insite', North America's first sanctioned supervised consumption site, saves the taxpayer system in excess of \$6 million per year by preventing HIV infection and death.¹

Myth: *Harm reduction programs and Consumption and Treatment Sites (CTS) make it easier for people to get drugs*

Fact: CTS's and harm reduction programs do not provide illegal drugs. A CTS is a place for people to use the drugs they already have in the presence of a trained health-care providers, have their drugs "checked" and access information, support and referrals for addiction services.

Myth: *Harm reduction prevents recovery and keeps people in active addiction*

Fact: Harm reduction's main goal is to keep people alive and as safe as possible, and often creates a pathway for recovery.

¹ Study in International Journal of Drug Policy; "A cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis of Vancouver's supervised injection facility"; 2010

USE EVERYDAY EXAMPLES

While we might immediately think of harm reduction as only being for substance use, we all use these strategies in our lives each day. Informing those around you about the many ways we utilize harm reduction practices in our lives can provide a deeper understanding of its importance.

Examples of harm reduction in everyday life:

- Wearing a seatbelt in the car
- Using sunscreen
- Wearing a helmet when riding a bike
- Calling a taxi after having a few drinks of alcohol
- Speed limits
- Washing your hands
- Wearing a hard helmet on a construction site
- Wearing a mask when sick

USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Use your social media platforms are a great way to share information and educate your networks of friends, families and neighbors about harm reduction. This can include sharing posts from organizations and groups doing harm reduction advocacy, sharing videos and graphics, and creating space for respectful discussions.

FOCUS ON THE EVIDENCE

Harm reduction is evidence-based and has been proven to have a positive impact on individual and community health.

We know there are a lot of misconceptions around the effectiveness of harm reduction. Focusing on evidence-based information when sharing information can help to strengthen the argument and reduces the likelihood of being challenged. It also allows others to make informed decisions and opinions once given the correct information.

It is more difficult for someone to challenge evidence than opinions not rooted in factual information. Being an advocate means being able to use the strongest and most effective arguments, while utilizing your passion to convey your beliefs.

Resources with evidence-based information:

- **Canadian Drug Policy Coalition:**
www.drugpolicy.ca/resources/evidence
- **Centre for Disease Control and Prevention:**
www.cdc.gov/ssp
- **Ontario Harm Reduction Network:**
www.ohrn.org/resources

ADDRESS THE STIGMA

Research shows the language people use can contribute to stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs. Stigmatizing language and disrespectful attitudes have real-life consequences that can lead to blame, shame, punishment and a barrier to accessing various supports.

As an advocate for harm reduction, we must be able to call out stigmatizing language and attitudes, and be intentional about our own language as well. While it can be difficult to speak out in certain social situations, it can also inspire others to be aware of their behaviors and language and how it affects members of the community, and helps to normalize the conversation.

Instead of this..	Say this instead
Addict/Junkie/User	Person who uses drugs
Substance abuse	Substance use
Clean	Abstinent, in recovery, no longer using
Clean/dirty needles	Sterile/new or used needles
Drug offender	Person arrested for drug violation
Relapsed	Had a setback

SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS AND PROGRAMS

Support local organizations and groups that have harm reduction programming and who support members of the community who use drugs.

Consider volunteering your time to support their programs, or donate funds or needed items if you're able. Volunteering can give you an appreciation of the work being done and empower you to continue to take action.

EXAMINE YOUR OWN BELIEFS

To be an effective advocate for harm reduction, it's important to reflect on your own biases and assumptions about drug use - we all have them!

Do you hold any stigmatizing beliefs about people who use drugs? How do you feel about harm reduction? Are you willing to keep learning and be challenged by others?

Check in with your habits and beliefs through learning, self-reflection and being open to growth as you continue on this journey.

RESOURCES

Websites

CATIE: www.catie.ca

Harm Reduction International: www.hir.global

Ontario Harm Reduction Network: www.ohrn.org.

Canadian Drug Policy Coalition: www.drugpolicy.ca

Books

Undoing Drugs: The Untold Story of Harm Reduction and the Future of Addiction by Maia Szalavitz

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts by Gabor Mate

Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction by Shira Hassan

Podcasts

Crackdown Podcast www.crackdownpod.com