

HARM REDUCTION IS...

1. Nothing about us, without us!

People who use drugs must be meaningfully involved in programme design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This includes employment of people who use drugs at all levels of harm reduction service provision, at the same pay and under the same conditions as non-users. Harm reduction encourages the establishment of peer led services, network development, documentation of human rights violations, advocacy for rights and drug law reform.

2. A people-centred approach

Building trustful relationships is central to harm reduction's people-centred approach. The essence of the harm reduction philosophy is a non-judgemental, non-prescriptive attitude. Honest and open contact is fundamental. As a result, people who use drugs feel humanised, acknowledged and empowered to make their own choices.

3. More than making services available

Services must be accessible, acceptable, affordable and of sufficient quality to ensure that people who use drugs can access their health rights. This means flexible programming, low-threshold policies, peer led services and a holistic approach.

4. Improving quality of life

Harm reduction aims to improve the quality of life of people who use drugs. Since a person is more than the substance he uses, attention to other basic needs, such as food, shelter, safety or work need to be included in harm reduction programming.

5. An integral part of prevention and rehabilitation

Harm reduction can be applied to the entire spectrum of a person's drug use career. There is no 'one size fits all' model for this heterogeneous population. Outcomes of harm reduction programmes differ per individual and range from healthier or more responsible drug use patterns and increased self-control to initiation into OST and abstinence. Harm reduction strategies are integrated in primary prevention, detox and rehabilitation services.

6. Understanding drug use in its social context

Harm reduction understands that drug use is a social phenomenon and that many harms related to drug use are either caused, or made considerably worse, by the social risk environment in which they occur. Harm reduction programmes involve and benefit family, the community, authorities, the medical community, politicians and local and national policy makers through advocacy. Different local and cultural realities mean that harm reduction programmes need to be adjusted to social realities and are most effective when tailor-made to the local context.

7. Recognising that drug use is not a crime!

Harm reduction stands for decriminalisation of drug use. It opposes criminal sanctions for drug use as well as compulsory or mandatory drug 'treatment'. Harm reduction programmes fill the gap in knowledge that individuals and communities might have with regard to drug use.

8. A human rights approach

Regardless of how drug use and dependence are understood, an individual user is entitled to fulfilment of all human rights and access to legal aid. This reduces stigma and discrimination. Criminalisation, stigma, discrimination and marginalisation do more harm to people who use drugs than drug use itself! Both critical enablers and obstacles need to be addressed in advocacy efforts.

9. Open to all people who use drugs

Harm reduction addresses health risks associated with smoking, snorting, swallowing and injecting different substances. Aside from safer drug use, harm reduction also addresses high risk sexual behaviour associated with drug use, as well as sexual and reproductive health rights. Harm reduction seeks to remove the barriers, faced by young people and women who use drugs, in accessing health services.

10. An evidence-based and holistic approach

A large body of evidence shows that harm reduction is effective in reducing the transmission of infectious diseases and that it benefits societies as a whole. Effective harm reduction programming includes legal aid, access to justice programmes, psychosocial support, family and partner involvement, fulfilment of basic needs, shelter and safe-zones (e.g. drug consumption rooms), creating livelihood opportunities, leading to full inclusion into society.