

Harm Reduction Examined

By Jim Rachels

I want to preface this article by saying I'm not entirely on one side of this topic or the other. As of now, I'm caught right in the middle as to what are the good aspects of harm reduction and the bad ones. I do see some positive aspects but I also believe there are some negative as well. So for those of us who don't know what "Harm Reduction" is, let's start off with an explanation of this method.

This is how Wikipedia defines "Harm Reduction" – Harm reduction, or harm minimization, refers to a range of public health policies designed to lessen the negative social and/or physical consequences associated with various human behaviors, both legal and illegal.

For those of us who still need clarification, this process and the policies put in place provide things such as doing a clean needle exchange, giving away free Narcan, fentanyl testing strips and in some cases, they actually have locations and sites where people can go and actually use their intravenous drugs and shoot up under supervision just in case something goes wrong. This is to help prevent overdoses as someone is right there ready to help just in case of anything. Some places like Canada will actually go as far as providing their patients with the drugs themselves based on the assessment of that person and the severity of their condition. That is something where I do not believe I will be in agreement with this. I think this would really deter people from trying to get sober. I understand maybe a safe injection site but I don't think it is wise to also be dispensing drugs such as crack or heroin. But that's my opinion and my opinion only. My job here is to simply present the facts and as mentioned there are a lot of good things to go with the bad here in my mind.

So when and where did this all start? This is from Workit Health Clinic's website – "Harm reduction arose from multiple movements in the United States in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, including the Black Panther Party survival programs, the Women's Health Movement that emerged from feminist activism around reproductive health, and the grassroots activism during the AIDS crisis. From these movements, advocates and activists created a vision and practice of harm reduction that continues to challenge our perspectives about people who use drugs and their rights."

From what I read and see about this topic is that it is about humanizing the person using.

So is this a good thing, a bad thing or something else? Well, that will depend on who you ask. And that's what I'm looking to dive into a little bit more here. The pros and cons of harm reduction.

Some people say that harm reduction is bad and will go as far and say some people getting something prescribed things such as methadone are not clean in that particular person's mind. Same thing with many other doctor prescribed medicines, such as antidepressants and other antipsychotic medications. The truth is I am not entirely in agreement with this point of view. I think in order to say whether this is a good thing or a bad thing we have to ask a question: What is the end goal of this treatment? If our one and only goal is to get this person off their drug of choice then there may be a different point of view I would see it from. If this is just truly to help reduce the risk of something happening to this person I don't think this is such a bad thing.

Let's take a heroin addict as an example. Now is our goal to get them off drugs completely or stop them from using heroin and going down the path of addiction? I think if our ultimate goal is to get that person off heroin why not use tools to help lessen the addictive behavior that we go through? Why can't people use these tools as prescribed by a doctor and still be in recovery? Why can't they say they have clean time? That's a question that I think really needs to be discussed more. If a person is simply using the tools that have been given to them to keep them using potentially fatal drugs I personally see nothing wrong with that. Again I can only speak for myself but I think using all the tools at our disposal to help someone get off their substance of choice is not a bad thing.

This not only is a problem of drug abuse but sharing needles and things like this help spread HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. These diseases are on the rise with active drug users. Clean needle exchanges help to curb these numbers and reduce the spread of disease. This becomes just more than a criminal issue, it is now a public health issue. Some areas that have instituted these policies have seen a dramatic decrease in these numbers. So in that regard, it is doing the community a service.

Now there is the question of people who are abusing these ways of trying to get sober. I can be sure that there are many people doing the needle exchanges and the like that have no intention of quitting anytime soon or anytime at all for that matter. What if this is just something that will keep them on the drugs while never trying to get better. What should be done with these people? Should they still be given access to these programs and how would we weed them out? This is where the programs get complicated.

My question is who is to say who receives help and who doesn't. The one thing I do agree on is that this should be a service available to all. No

matter if the intention is to keep on using or not. We should still provide these people with a safe place to do something that no matter what they were going to do out on the streets. Again this also boils down to that this is now a public health crisis in some areas that needs to be addressed.

As long as the positive things keep outweighing the negatives I will be in agreement with that the entire time through and through.

These are some of the questions that need a bit more research done on and finding a middle of the road path for all. I'm not saying we neglect anyone and deny them the care they are seeking but maybe we can have more ways of converting these people into people who want to legitimately quit using, and weed out the abusers of the program and figure out a different approach as to what to do with them. That is a difficult question but the ultimate goal is to turn away no one but if someone is going to use this program to destroy their own lives and health that is an issue.

I think that something else that absolutely needs to be addressed is the stigma surrounding drug use. I think this is one of the things that keep the old policies in place. I think that people who stigmatize drug use have less inclination to want to help with this epidemic. They see addicts as a group of weak-willed individuals who have control and just choose not to use it. Obviously, they don't get it.

Stigma I believe deters more people from seeking help than we would like to acknowledge. This is just the sad truth of drug addiction. So many people do not seek out the help they need out of the fear they will be stigmatized and treated differently by their friends and family. So how do we go about trying to stop this stigma that surrounds harm reduction? I think the biggest thing is education. I think the people that stigmatize drug addiction and recovery are the ones that are the least informed on this situation. So I think education is vital in our struggle to remove this stigma. People need to have easy and accessible research at their fingertips if wanted.

Based on the most relevant and up-to-date information addiction is a disease of the brain. When actually doing a scan of the brain and comparing an addict versus a non-addict our brains are actually different. Some brains are different because of the years of abuse but some of the scans show some of us are just born with this. It is not something that we could help and something with no cure as of right now. I don't think anyone in their right mind would choose to take this path. Yes, there are abusers which is an entirely different subject. I bring this up as these folks may not face the same challenges as a full-blown addict. So that leads people to say why can an abuser stop if given a reason to do so while addicts can't stop like that. Some see us as one in the same. This

just isn't the case. Someone that is not addicted and is just classified as an abuser is someone who can quit if given a good enough reason to.

A good example of a drug and alcohol abuser is a college student. Many college students abuse drugs and alcohol while in school. They may use it daily, nightly or maybe just on the weekends. Some may binge drink. But when graduation comes and they have to enter the real world with a full time job and more responsibilities they are given a good reason to quit and they do. An addict would not be able to just do this as easily as others. But for some reason people can tend to think that the two are one in the same. They are not.

Another benefit of harm reduction is it has been shown to help with reducing drug related criminal behavior. As far as the cons go, here are a few things that people have shown to be true and are negative things that can help lead to more abuse and possibly death if they overdose. First thing is that if people just use this as part of a daily routine it will normalize this for them. And some may argue that this is a bad thing. We don't want those suffering from addiction to think this is their new normal for life and see nothing else for themselves. I think we need to put things in place to make it slightly more difficult for these addicts in a way that helps them. Such as something that they have to speak to a counselor or someone about ways to get clean before they are able to use in the facility. Maybe the addicts would be willing to do this and it might save a few extra lives and not make this so "normal" to them. This also leads them to be less likely to seek treatment in many cases. They have no motivation to quit as this is their "new norm."

I think the one thing I most have an issue with is the injection sites where you are able to obtain your drug of choice. There are sites that provide this. It is called "Safe Supply." I don't believe it helps the addict. I think this is completely taking away all the reason to ever consider quitting. One of the things that also makes us quit when we do is the fact that we were going to extraordinary lengths to get our fix. We get sick and tired of these things. We don't like facing difficult situations which in my mind might help in getting some people sober. Once you have a place for someone to come, get their supply, shoot up and off they go many addicts are going to have no interest whatsoever in getting sober. I think they should have to bring their own supply but that's just my opinion.

One of the things that needs to really be assessed at the end of the are the stats and numbers. Some studies have shown that people that are taking part in things like the clean needle exchange are more likely to seek out help and receive treatment. So if this is the case in this instance I think a lot more research needs to be done and most of all have people in this field to spread these findings around within our community. I feel once we are able to educate more people they will see the benefits of harm

reduction. I think it's also important they see the flaws in some aspects of this program. People should be able to weigh the pros and cons and use them to make the decision that is best for them and their recovery.

At the end of the day if we're working the Addicts Anonymous Ten-Step program and are working step ten we are here to help all those in need and in active addiction. And I have group members of mine that make a good point - dead people don't recover. So no matter what side of the road you are on when it comes to "Harm Reduction" we are here with the same end goal in mind, safety and ultimately sobriety. Let's all get there together.

So in conclusion, I am still stuck in the middle and I think for good reason. In this article, we have examined both the good and bad aspects of harm reduction that I can think of. I hope in the end that this article can reach someone and maybe help them.