



BEHAVIORAL HEALTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

# Community Health Worker Toolkit

Featuring a special focus on mental and substance  
use disorders within primary care



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## Harm Reduction

### Main Points:

- Harm reduction is a set of strategies to reduce the negative affects of drug use.
- Harm reduction provides supports to allow people to make decisions about their own lives.
- Using harm reduction strategies is an excellent tool in engaging people wherever they are in their lives.

Harm reduction emphasizes the importance of reducing harmful behaviors around drug use. There are many health-related harms associated with drug use, including contracting HIV or Hepatitis C, abscesses, and overdose. There are also many potential legal and social harms of drug use, including incarceration, violence, and homelessness. Harm reduction recognizes that it is possible to reduce harm even while a person is continuing to use drugs. Strategies may include using less drugs, sniffing instead of injecting, never sharing needles, only using needles once, or not using drugs at all. Harm reduction is an excellent way to engage people who may not want to stop doing drugs all together, but want to take steps to get healthier. Supporting others to make any positive change in their lives is a powerful tool for engagement and support.

A major value of harm reduction is respecting people's choices and wishes for their own health. In harm reduction, it is often stressed that people are experts in their own lives. Some people may identify drug use as their primary health concern, while others may identify their housing situation as their primary concern. Supporting them in this process helps build their confidence and self-esteem. Harm reduction stresses the importance of letting individuals identify their own priorities in order to brainstorm solutions. Not all problems have one solution! And many people know what works best for them, even if their solutions aren't 100% risk free.



## Case Study: Alex

The following is a case study on harm reduction. As you read this paragraph, as yourself in what risky behaviors is this person engaging? How can clients reduce their harms?

*Alex is a 35-year-old male who identifies as gay, and often exchanges sex for drugs or money in Baltimore. He injects both heroin and cocaine. He is homeless and has been sleeping in an alley near a fire station.*

**What are some of the risky behaviors that Alex is engaging in?  
How can he reduce their harms?**

### RISKY BEHAVIOR

**Exchanging sex  
for drugs or money**

### HOW TO MAKE RISKY BEHAVIORS SAFER

- do not have sex for drugs or money
- always use condoms when having sex
- have sex with fewer people

**Injecting heroin  
or cocaine**

- stop using heroin and/or cocaine
- inhale drugs nasally (snort) instead of injecting them
- only inject one drug
- always use new needles when injecting
- use heroin and/or cocaine fewer times per day

**Sleeping in an alley**

- try to find more permanent housing
- sleep in a shelter
- sleep in a warm abandoned house
- sleep in a tent city

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