



HARM REDUCTION— Core Concept, Real-Life Implications, and HIV+ Vampires

Written by Carina Havenstrite

Over the last few years, the concept of harm reduction has been increasingly present, particularly in the drug and alcohol and recovery communities. Harm reduction has become a buzzword that is frequently discussed, but

people often have a hard time understanding, articulating, and/or buying into it. When working to understand a word or concept, many people's first instinct is to look up the definition of the word.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines harm reduction as "a set of intentional practices and public health policies that aim to reduce the negative social and physical consequences of human behaviors, both legal and illegal. It is also known as harm minimization."

But what does that actually mean? Although methods and theories of harm reduction are numerous and vary even within the field of harm reduction,

the core concept is a simple one. As someone who has worked in harm reduction (in various roles, capacities, and populations) for almost 15 years, the easiest way for me to describe harm reduction is enabling people to make SAFER choices. Particularly for individuals who do not have experience with harm reduction, this can be a difficult concept to understand because the safer choice, from a harm reduction standpoint, is not always necessarily the SAFEST choice or what a person, or even society in general, may deem the correct choice. When it comes to drug and alcohol use, the safest choice is obviously simply not to use these substances at all or to stop using them altogether.

For people who have never struggled with addiction or had someone they love fall victim to the disease of addiction, this seems like an obvious and easy solution. However, for many people, it is simply not a reality, or even an option. This is where harm reduction comes into play. When people are not ready or able to live a sober lifestyle, the goal of harm reduction is to keep people alive, encourage positive change, and empower



HARM REDUCTION—Core Concept, Real-Life Implications, and HIV+ Vampires

continued

people who use drugs and alcohol (and their families) to live healthier lives on their own terms. Particularly in the addiction and recovery space, harm reduction can take a wide variety of forms, which can include, but may not be limited to, naloxone (Narcan) distribution, medication-assisted treatment (MAT), maintenance drinking/drug use, syringe service programs, medication disposal bags, supervised consumption sites, fentanyl/xylazine testing strips and other drug-checking methods, and wound care and cleaning/safer use kits. Although these harm reduction methods can sometimes be controversial, significant studies have shown that harm reduction is effective and saves lives. However, harm reduction does not always take the form you might expect, which is why it is important to understand the core concept and theory of harm reduction to support people to make safer choices.

Quite some time ago, I was working as the director of case management in a Ryan White HIV clinic when one of our case management clients voiced that she was getting very involved with vampire subculture and was extremely excited about it. Although the logical gut response was to tell this woman that she should simply not drink human blood and that it was obviously not a good idea, her case manager and I knew that there was nothing we could do or say that was going to convince her not to attend the next “vampire party.” Therefore, we decided to take a harm reduction approach and educate her on how to be a safe HIV+ vampire, which in this situation meant making sure she understood that she should only “feed” from other people, and no one should drink her blood, as well as that she should always get recent testing results from the person she was feeding from.

Although they do not teach you how to deal with such situations in college and I definitely did not see that one coming, I feel that this situation effectively illustrates the core concept of harm reduction—to make people safer—maybe not the safest, but safer, nonetheless. Although no consumption of blood would have been the ideal outcome, we knew that this was not going to be the reality of the situation. By taking a harm reduction approach, we not only prevented this client from possibly transmitting HIV to unsuspecting partygoers, but also educated and empowered her to make her own positive decisions. By respecting the client’s choices and working to understand her decision instead of judging it, the harm reduction approach also allowed us to build a level of trust and rapport that had not existed prior to this interaction. Taking a harm reduction approach can help build respect, trust, and relationships with people living through addiction, which can increase the likelihood that they will reach out if or when they are ready for recovery. Harm reduction is not just a buzzword but a core concept based on nonjudgment, respect, and empowering individuals to make safer choices and positive changes in their lives.

