

Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center

Tip Sheet: Harm Reduction in RHY Programs

What is Harm Reduction?

“Harm reduction refers to policies, programs and practices that aim to reduce the harms associated with the use of psychoactive drugs in people unable or unwilling to stop. The defining features are the focus on the prevention of harm, rather than on the prevention of drug use itself, and the focus on people who continue to use drugs.” Harm Reduction includes any service designed to reduce the harmful consequences of high risk behaviors (i.e. running away, being homeless, A&D use, unprotected sex, street economics for survival, etc.) all of these behaviors are high risk and all of youth accessing FYSB funded RHY services have at least experienced one of the first two and/or are “at-risk” of experiencing one of these two.

Why is Harm Reduction Important in RHY Programs?

All youth need harm reduction- be it a toddler in a MGH that needs a gate at the stairs to prevent falling or a BCP youth that is 10 and running away from home or skipping school and hanging out in the park or a youth living in an “abandonium.” The key for RHY programs is to identify what the high risk behaviors are, how they will design services to reduce the consequences associated with specific behaviors be that IV drug use, unprotected sex, street survival, etc. in their community as each community will be unique.

How do RHY programs implement a Harm Reduction Philosophy?

Programs must ask:

- What are the specific risks and harms associated with specific behavior? (i.e. running away, surviving on the street, being homeless, being exploited, street economics, etc.);
- What causes those risks? And,
- What can the program/staff do to help reduce those risks/harms?

Harm Reduction policies must be tailored to the individual and must take into account factors such as gender, age, housing status, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, etc. Most harm reduction approaches are inexpensive, easy to implement, and have a high positive impact on the individual, family, and community. Harm reduction approaches are designed to meet youth where they are and “small successes/changes” are recognized as significant as people are more likely to take several small steps than one or two huge leaps. Harm reduction approaches recognize that youth and families are always entitled to being treated with respect, dignity, and compassion. One of the most challenging aspects of implementing a Harm Reduction Philosophy is that it requires transparency, accountability, and participation throughout the organization not in an isolated program or component of a program.



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A harm reduction program should empower youth by offering a support system that allows youth enough control to make their own positive decisions and then space to safely see the outcomes of these decisions. Since youth are by definition young, they are still gaining their footing on what it means to live life as an adult. For the highest risk youth to gain this footing, a safe space with a low-barrier for entry is necessary, but youth also need access to adults they can trust and services that can help them break the cycle of street-involvement. Harm reduction for youth means meeting a youth where they are in life and letting them make decisions about the program they are in and their own futures.

¹ What is Harm Reduction: A Position Statement from the International Harm Reduction Association. Retrieved from: http://www.ihra.net/files/2010/05/31/IHRA_HRStatement.pdf on 26 September 2014.

Additional Resources:

http://www.usich.gov/population/youth/harm_reduction_for_youth/harm_reduction_advice_from_leaders_in_the_field/

http://www.usich.gov/population/youth/harm_reduction_for_youth

<http://harmreduction.org/>

<http://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

So Glad You Came! Harm Reduction Therapy in Community Settings

Come As You Are: Harm Reduction Drop-In Groups for Multi-Diagnosed Drug Users

Harm Reduction Therapy Groups: Engaging Drinkers and Drug Users in a Process of Change

Partners in Treatment: Relational Psychoanalysis and Harm Reduction Therapy



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