What Is Harm Reduction

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Harm reduction is a simple, old kindness. If someone is going to do something risky, we hand them the information that keeps them safer, and we do it without shame. Think of seat belts, bicycle helmets, condoms, the friend who volunteers to be the designated driver. None of them tell you to speed, ride into traffic or have sex. They accept that people will do what people do, and they ask what would make it less likely to end in a hospital.

The idea took its modern shape in the 1980s. HIV and hepatitis were moving through communities by way of shared needles, and the usual answer, telling people to stop, was not working. In places like Amsterdam and Liverpool, drug users and the health workers who cared about them began offering clean needles and plain respect instead of waiting for people to quit. [1, 2] Infections fell. The fear that clean needles would draw more people into drug use did not bear out. [3] From that experience grew a movement with one belief at its center: every life is worth protecting, whatever choices a person has made.

The same care grew up around psychedelics: in the people who sat with strangers through hard nights at festivals, in peer support lines like Fireside Project, and in organizations like DanceSafe that test and teach. Much of the harm in this world comes down to a missing piece of information at a bad moment.

That is the only reason this handout exists. It is not here to teach anyone how to use a substance, and it is not here to tempt anyone toward something illegal. It is here to put in your hands the information that could keep you, or someone you love, out of harm's way.

Please Read First

A few honest words before we begin. This handout is educational. It is not medical, legal or professional advice, and I am not a physician or an attorney. I gathered what is here from published harm reduction organizations, medical and legal sources, and my own training and experience, and I may have gotten something wrong. Please check anything you plan to act on with a qualified medical provider and, for questions of law, an attorney. Laws and research on psychedelics move fast, so some of this may have changed since the date above. Nothing here encourages anyone to break the law. It exists to look after people who will make their own choices. I do my best to keep up with current

law and research, but I cannot promise that anything here is current or complete.

My strongest suggestion is to meet with a psychedelic-informed physician for an assessment before you use any psychedelic or related substance. A good one can look at your history, your medications and your heart, which no web page can do.

Where this information came from: The history and evidence in this handout come from the numbered sources at the end.As with any fact you meet on social media, do your own due diligence to check it for accuracy.

References

[1] Lewis J. Emergence of harm reduction. In: Psychoactive Substances and Society (open textbook). eCampusOntario Pressbooks; 2022. ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/psychoactivedrugsandsociety

[2] Harm reduction. In: Encyclopedia of Drug Policy. SAGE Publications. sk.sagepub.com

[3] Mermin J. Syringe service programs are safe, effective, and cost-saving. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; June 26, 2019.