



The ABCs of Reducing Harm: Stigma and Harm Reduction

Providing non-judgmental support, promoting safety, and connecting people with life-saving resources builds a safer and healthier community.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet is intended to provide helpful tips for supportive recovery operators. For information on registration and operational requirements, please visit [Assisted Living in BC](#).

Introduction

Harm reduction practices have many benefits. Some people in recovery communities hold negative or unfounded beliefs about harm reduction. Increase your knowledge and skills to support residents who would benefit from these practices by learning how to recognize and address stigma towards harm reduction and how a harm reduction approach fits into recovery.



Key words and definitions

Stigma: Negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes towards people with certain characteristics, such as race, gender, or mental health challenges. Stigma often leads to discrimination, shame, and reluctance to seek support when needed.

Reducing Harm: Adopting policies, programs, and practices that aim to increase a resident's safety and reduce negative health impact of substance use disorder (SUD).

Empathy: The ability to understand what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

Stigma and harm reduction

A concern some people have about harm reduction services or programs is that they can be viewed as encouragement to continue substance use. Harm reduction does not cause people to start or increase substance use (SU).

In fact, there is strong evidence that shows that harm reduction services effectively reduce harms related to SU. For example, having harm reduction supplies available could protect people who use substances from HIV and hepatitis infection and prevent overdose deaths.

Research also shows that harm reduction services can support and encourage people's involvement in SU treatment and recovery services.

Why is it important to address stigma in recovery settings?

Stigma can stop people who use substances from asking for help and accessing health services or support. Harm reduction services can increase safety and provide an opportunity to connect people with the appropriate healthcare, support, and resources.

It is important for SU treatment and recovery staff to have up-to-date information about harm reduction so they can understand a resident's level of readiness for, and support access to, harm reduction services in a timely manner.

Increasing empathy

There are many reasons why a person might use substances, including:

- Withdrawal symptoms
- Mental health issues
- Rejection from family
- Poverty
- Violence
- Colonization
- Racism
- Stigma
- Other forms of trauma

Understanding these reasons can help you empathize with and support people in a non-judgmental way. This might include validating where they are at and connecting them to open-minded and welcoming harm reduction services.

How to reduce harm during the recovery journey

Both promoting abstinence and reducing harm have a place in recovery. Experts suggest that using both approaches can engage more people who are at different moments of readiness for change. See examples in the table below. Staff can use these strategies to support wellness, health, and safety.

When	What (Example)	Benefit (How it reduces harm)
During Intake	Clearly communicate support available to residents who relapse and procedures to support their continued recovery.	Assures residents of non-judgmental, person-centred care, and encourages them to be honest with themselves and to seek help.
When Relapse Occurs	Assess the situation without judgment. Immediately administer naloxone if there is a risk of opioid overdose, and call emergency services.	Prevents opioid overdose death by restoring breathing before paramedics arrive.
After Relapse	Respond with empathy and adjust the treatment plan to help the individual get back on track and continue their recovery journey.	Individuals feel understood and supported, which fosters trust and encourages them to stay engaged in their recovery journey, ultimately increasing the likelihood of sustained recovery and long-term success.
Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT)	Connect residents with opioid use disorder (OUD) to OAT services to prevent further relapse. Prescribers are now available virtually. Call 1-833-804-8111 or search for “Opioid Agonist Treatment” to find in-person and virtual services in your area.	Prevents residents from further relapse with OAT medication and monitoring by a health professional.
Transfer	Connect residents to other SU treatment and recovery services without unfair treatment if a transfer is requested.	Supports residents to take responsibility for their SU recovery and make choices that could improve their overall wellness.
Transition Planning	Encourage residents to continue their recovery journey and seek care. Connect residents to outreach teams and other services without judgment if residents choose to exit.	Outreach programs establish links between people who use substances and health services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needle exchange • Supervised consumption • Drug testing • Low-barrier recovery support



Summary

- ✓ Reducing harm is important but often stigmatized.
- ✓ Promoting abstinence and reducing harm can work together.
- ✓ Recognizing stigma toward relapse and learning ways to support clients can create an empathetic, healing environment.

To learn more, visit the [Tools and Resources - Province of British Columbia \(gov.bc.ca\)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca) and scroll down to the Fact Sheets section.



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