

Why Families Should Consider Harm Reduction

It is very difficult for a family member to watch a loved one struggle with drugs or alcohol or other potentially dangerous behaviors. As a parent we want to protect our child and keep them out of harm's way. What families need to remember is that their child has grown into an adult, who, for better or for worse, needs to learn how to make their own decisions, and he or she must also learn to live with the consequences of their actions. Part of the process, of become a responsible and fulfilled adult is to reflect on past behaviors and experiences, and learn how to adapt behaviors to fit with goals. All people have the right to self-determination, that is, to determine what is right for them, and to act in a manner accordingly. Your loved one may be engaging in what you perceive to be a dangerous behavior, but it is important to remember that they need your support and for the family to provide a safe and non-judgmental environment. The practice of harm reduction, is a crucial step, in your loved one's recovery. Harm reduction respects the right of your loved one to control their own actions. Your family member may be resistant to entering traditional treatment and may not be ready to discontinue or modify their dangerous or risky behavior. Harm Reduction practices accepts or 'meets' your loved one on his or her terms regardless of where they are at in terms of their recovery. The only requirement in harm reduction is a willingness to participate in such treatment and to work on modifying aspects of a risky behavior that they have themselves, identified as troublesome. Harm reduction seeks to reduce the level of harm inherent in a behavior by making it safer and more sustainable, so that your loved one does not accidentally overdose or have any other lethal or dangerous outcomes. Harm Reduction, will act as a protective force, keeping your loved one safe, while he/she finds their own path to recovery. As a parent, it is natural to want to your loved one only to

engage in healthy adaptive, life affirming behaviors, but you cannot impose your will onto your loved one. It simply will not work. Their behaviors are outside your realm of control and your loved one, sensing your disapproval will just go to great lengths to hide his or her behavior from you, and may not turn to you in that crucial moment when they really need the help. If you penalize your loved one because you disprove of their actions, you increase their distance from you and their distrust in you. You are not enabling your family member when you engage in harm reduction, you are fostering in him/her the ability to be autonomous and make mature decisions. By engaging in the practice of harm reduction you build mutual respect and trust. The best that you can do for your loved one is to encourage engagement around harm reduction and to provide him or her with unconditional love, a safe non-judgmental space, so that they can turn to you when they are in distress.