

Harm Reduction and Housing

Best Practice when working with Drug Users

Accessing and stabilizing housing with clients who use drugs presents unique challenges. Thinking about how you can incorporate harm reduction practices into your work can help support successful tenancies whether you work regularly with drug users or not.

Every client and situation is different, however there are some overarching practices that can help find and stabilize appropriate, safe housing while maintaining a good client/worker relationship.

"Harm Reduction is working with people who are using substances without requiring they change their substance use, instead meeting and support the person where they are at"

Deborah Waddington, Toronto Public Health 2014

1. Building trust and avoiding judgment cannot be stressed enough

Creating and maintaining a trusting relationship with any client is important, with drug users this is even more important because of the amount of stigma and guilt associated with drug use. Forming judgements is natural but necessary to minimize in order to build trust. In the end your clients will use drugs no matter how you feel about it; your job will be easier if you both can be open about their use and the barriers that will come from that. The physical health challenges and symptoms that can make it difficult to function are often mistaken by workers as laziness, or low motivation. We must check ourselves frequently to avoid this. Building trust will take time. Living on or near the street does not provide a lot of space for talking about feeling and processing. Don't be afraid of silence, your client may have to go through a lot to decide to share with you. Homelessness and the stigma around drug use can seriously affect your client's self-esteem, make sure to give praise where it's due, especially for things that might seem small to you.

2. Take care of yourself!

Working with drug users and working in housing are both hard, uphill battles. Many people don't want to work in these sectors, working in both is exponentially more difficult. Burn-out, and compassion fatigue are common. Make sure you take the time to relax, unwind and connect with people who can support you. Because people who use drugs are so marginalized and building trust is a slow process the relationships you have built are very important and needed. For you to be there for your clients you need to be healthy. Make sure you take the time you need to stay healthy in all ways.

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3. Recognize your client is the expert of their life and you are there to support

Allowing your clients to take ownership over their lives goes a long way towards sticking to goals and maintaining housing. People using drugs, particularly if they are homeless, have often had their power taken away or had power wielded over them on many different occasions, ensuring that you are not replicating that dynamic is crucial to building trust. Check in with your client about meeting times, housing opportunities, and what they realistically think they can manage. Many people will feel guilty if they disappoint you and this can lead to them avoiding you. Ensuring that you are respecting their time and needs, and that it would be really hard to disappoint you will build both trust and self-esteem, as well as make sure your clients continue to come to you. At the same time, it is important to recognize the effect it takes to get things done while using drugs, and the fact that those things are near impossible to do without support. Your work is very important.

4. Take the time to find the right place

One of the biggest mistakes that housing workers can make is to rush to get a client housing. Housing that is not appropriate, safe, has a zero tolerance policy for drug use, etc might mean that the housing will not last for the client. It is exhausting to find a home, and then devastating when it doesn't work out. It's better to take the time to make sure that the housing is suitable for all your client's needs. While looking for housing, explore temporary shelter possibilities, and always keep your client's safety as a top priority for both temporary and long term housing.

5. Prepare your client for moving in

Once your client has moved into their housing there are some helpful supports you can put in place to help stabilize them. Create a daily routine with your client; secure food and basic necessities; sign your client up for a trusteeship or create a financial plan with your client to avoid rent arrears; do a site visit to get a sense of the landlord, other tenants, roommates, to get a sense for what barriers might exist; remind your client that it takes some time to adjust; identify and work on changing behaviours that can lead to a risk of eviction. Even more importantly, helping your client access funds will help enormously. Sign up for Rent Pay Direct to decrease landlord anxiety; apply for ODSP whenever possible; apply for Trillium and Special Diet funds; update your client's address with Canada Revenue Agency for GST/HST cheques; advocate with income workers.

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6. Do not, under any circumstance, deny services to people because of their drug use

"Harm Reduction is working with people who are using substances without requiring they change their substance use, instead meeting and support the person where they are at", said Deborah Waddington from Toronto Public Health. This means that regardless of your client's drug use, whether they disclose it to you or not, whether they "fall off the wagon" or never decide to quit, you are

going to provide them support. Requiring drug users to be sober, clean or have a treatment plan before you allow them to use your services is not harm reduction work, it is also not very effective.

Particularly damaging is when clients are expelled from services, especially shelters, for using drugs. They can lose everything overnight, their possessions, friends, support systems, self-esteem, etc. Being forced to leave the few supports they have can set your client back years.

"So remember..."

It is important to remember the following when practicing harm reduction in housing work:

- **Check yourself on any judgments you may have and give time to build trust**
- **Remember that your role is to support, your client must make their own decisions for your relationship to work**
- **Find support for yourself to maintain your health so you can be present for your clients**
- **Don't rush the process, finding the best housing possible helps keep your client housed in the long run**
- **Set up supports for your client in the neighbourhood, and financially once they have moved in**
- **Meet your client where they are, don't put restrictions on accessing your services based on their drug use**

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For more information:

To find out more about Harm Reduction and Housing see:

Balian, Raffi. (Sept 2010). "The Role of HOUSING in Harm Reduction". Total HYPE Newsletter. COUNTERfit Harm Reduction Program: South Riverdale Community Health Centre. Pp.6-9. Accessed 6 August 2014. <http://www.srchc.ca/downloads/TotalHypeNewsletter2010September.pdf>

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Harm Reduction Coalition. "Principles of Harm Reduction". Accessed 6 August 2014. <http://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>.

Toronto Harm Reduction Task Force. "Guide to Keeping Your Housing".