



The Harm Reduction team

HARM REDUCTION

USE SAFELY STAY HEALTHY

SISTERING

CHANGING
LIVES
ONE WOMAN
AT A TIME

Putting the Strategy to Work

Harm reduction is a pretty simple concept: offer substance users and sex workers the information and support they need “where they’re at” to use safely and stay healthy. It’s a social justice and public health response to drug use; rather than criminalizing users it focuses on reducing the harm associated with high risk behaviors – HIV, Hepatitis C, STI’s, for example, that come with shared needles and crack pipes, and unprotected sex.

Putting the harm reduction concept into practice calls for a team who have lived experience because “the wisdom of the community will always exceed the knowledge of the expert” (John McKnight).

Called Peer Harm Reduction Workers, our team connects with women who are using substances and/or are street involved because they have credibility; they have walked that road and in fact, may still be using. But they are strong, committed, compassionate advocates for the program and the women they serve – they deserve respect not stigma – they know they are making a difference and Sistering values them and the work they do.

What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction focuses on reducing social, economic and health-related issues, helping women involved in substance use and/or sex work to build resiliency and improve overall health and wellbeing.

What is a Peer Harm Reduction Worker?

Sistering employs a team of Peer Workers who have lived experience with drug use to help deliver programs at our 24/7Drop In and through our Outreach programs, and make and distribute harm reduction kits and educational materials.

In addition to practical supports such as harm reduction kits and referrals to government and counselling services, and self-help initiatives, our Peer team helps build a community where the women we serve are honoured, respected and supported in their ability to make their own life decisions.

What do Peer Harm Reduction Workers do?

Peer workers are considered the best source of authentic support because of their lived experience. They help determine effective interventions to reduce the harm caused by substance use,

educating drug users on how to use more safely and teaching safe sex practices to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. They make and distribute safer smoking and injection kits and make referrals to other health agencies that provide support. And often, just as importantly, they are the voice of women who have no voice.

Are Peer Workers specially trained?

Lived experience is a Peer Worker’s most critical tool. But Workers also receive harm reduction training from Toronto’s Public Health department – how to implement safer drug practices in their outreach work, for example, or how to administer Narcan to reduce the effects of heroin overdose.

They also learn important personal life lessons: how to set

boundaries so they keep enough of themselves for themselves; how to manage self care so they don’t burn out; how to teach and lead by example; and how to accept that they can’t make things right for everyone they touch but, at the end of the day, they did the best they could.

Is the work they do important?

Peer Harm Reduction Workers save lives, sometimes their own. They empower substance users and sex workers to use safely and live with dignity. They ensure that information is shared and that women know what they are entitled to, so that no one gets left behind. And because Peer Harm Reduction Workers receive an honorarium, the team gains not only an income but also renewed self-confidence and sense of purpose and personal value.

While Sistering’s Peer Harm Reduction Program assists female drug users in staying healthier, it just as importantly helps the peers facilitating the program to feel inspired - their contributions drive their personal growth and help them to better manage their own lives. Participating in outreach is rewarding. Peers receive recognition from the community, and they are often told by the women they help, that they are happy the

peers are there. It is a peer-to-peer relationship that is mutually beneficial and inspiring.

“Perhaps the most important aspect of this job is seeing how the women learn to love themselves and strive to become all they can be. It is wonderful to be able to see how far they have come, despite all they have been through. The strength and perseverance of these women never fails to amaze me,” says Carol Danis, Harm Reduction Coordinator.



The Story of D.

D is 36 years old, the mother of two girls aged 18 and 19. They live with their dad. D. Facebooks them.

D. left home at 14, bouncing from her 16-year-old boyfriend's place to a shelter to family and back again.

She worked furiously to create a safe home for her young family – her girls were always her priority – but despite her strength and courage the girls' father eventually gained custody.

D. spent a decade using crack. She worked as an exotic dancer. She came into conflict with the law.

A chance encounter with a woman who came to Sistering led her to the Drop In.

Fast forward: today D. is a Peer Harm Reduction Worker. She is a vocal advocate for homeless and marginalized women, fighting for their right to be safe and warm and treated with the dignity.

Sistering gave D. strength, she says. She learned that she deserved to be treated with respect.

D. keeps a journal, writing her thoughts as poems rather than random narrative because, she says, these thoughts are private, they belong to her.

Here is where D. was.

NO ESCAPE

She sleeps.

A never-ending sleep so deep.

*Everything inside her
in secret she keeps.*

*She tosses and turns
as the night goes by.*

*For all her sadness
will not subside.*

*Even as she sleeps you can see
tears in her eyes.*

*As sadness becomes her blanket,
fear is her pillow.*

*Yet she is the one
that truly knows.*

*Misery has engulfed her
and will never let go.*

*And so she sleeps
as a release from the pain.*

To see the sun instead of rain.

*Despair has become
one of her banes.*

*Fear and pain have been
life long friends.*

*That's how she knows that
the suffering just won't end.*

*So she sleeps hoping
it will all descend.*

*It even creeps up on her
in her sleep.*

*Is there anywhere
she can find peace?*

*The answer is no
so she continues to sleep.*

Who will D. be in two years?
"A better version of myself."

In Their Own Words

“Harm reduction means safety – and safety is sexy. We don't condemn or condone. The program is not punitive.

“The reality is, it's a hard job. I'm not better than you. I could pick up and use again. The use is not going away. Get a harm reduction job – and you start to build a life”

– D.

“The women keep us going. We're all peers – and we learn something new from each other. I had been sober for 10 years when I lost my son. I cycled out of control and was living on the street. We are all living with addiction – but that does not mean we are bad women or bad moms.

“Helping women empowers them to help themselves.”

– N.

“It's about experience, applying what I have been through, and what I have learned, to help other people. I know how they feel – they are not alone like I was – and that sucked.

“It's hard work. And there is stress. Am I worthy of being a Peer Worker? I'm using. Am I a good role model? I don't know. But I come to work. I do my shift. We're not perfect!

“We need to practice self care. When I have a crappy day, I read the quotes I collect like:

There is no elevator to success. You have to take the stairs.

Don't let small minds convince you that your dreams are too big.

“It helps.”

– L.

“I became a Peer Worker for my own mental health. A lot of Black women have been victimized and they are too proud to ask for help. They think, ‘It's life; it's OK; it's nothing’.

“When we're in a violent situation we don't see the choices. I want to help women see this is not their only option. I want to make a difference.”

– K.

“I'm a user – although I don't like to be labelled. I experienced a lot of negativity. If it hadn't been for harm reduction, I wouldn't be here. I pass along what I have learned. Sometimes, when someone offers help, people shut down. They're scared. But what I can tell them is important; I'm helping people stay safe.

“Drugs will never go away. So instead of focusing on eradicating the problem, we should focus on making sure people have the information they need to be safe.

“I pray in the morning – I ask to have a positive day. You forget about your problems here because people have it way worse than you do.”

– C.

Visit our website at www.sistering.org and discover how you can join the Sistering community as a volunteer, or by offering in-kind or monetary donations.

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