Harm Reduction as a Tool for Personal Use

Harm Reduction is a tool useful for addressing potentially risky, dangerous, or self-destructive behaviors. Examples of such behaviors include addiction to drugs as well as other potentially lethal addictions, unsafe sexual activities, self-harm, and binge eating. The goal of harm reduction is to make dangerous behaviors more safe and to reduce the level of harmful consequences caused by the risky behavior. Harm reduction is a philosophy based on the right to self-determination and it accepts or ‘meets’ the individual wherever he or she is in their journey to recovery. Harm reduction is humanistic not moralistic. The philosophy of harm reduction makes no moral judgments and assumes a non-judgmental stance. It neither advocates for or rejects given behaviors. What is assessed is the fit between the behavior and the individual; that is, is the behavior working for the individual. It is not a requirement of harm reduction, that a person, become abstinent, or stop engaging in risky practices. The only requirement of harm reduction is a willingness to take part in treatment around what you have identified as a potentially troublesome behavior. The process addresses the particular behaviors and practices that the individual has identified as being harmful to their well being. Harm reduction is innovative, as it is person-centered, and the client is always in control of and guides the course of treatment. According to the philosophy of harm reduction, you will not be penalized for continuing to engage in risky behavior while in treatment and your care will not be discontinued if you do not conform to traditional expectations. The practice of harm reduction makes no demands, and can make the difference between life and death, helping the person to live a life that is sustainable and happy and productive.

A common goal of harm reduction is to find out what benefits the person is deriving from their behavior, and to help the person substitute healthier behavioral choices providing the same benefit, as
well as to teach coping and distress tolerance skills to help the person manage the transition to safer practices.

How harm reduction works. Take for example, a person who is addicted to drugs. Harm Reduction interventions may include using the drug in a safe environment with people you trust, obtaining the drug in its pure form from a reputable source, and avoiding using more than one drug a time. Other interventions could include moderating drug intake and not using the substance when one needs to be responsible, such as not using drugs when working. A common goal of many people who use drugs is not to discontinue drug use but rather to manage their drug use so that it does not interfere with their goals and daily functioning. Harm Reduction approaches embrace the possibility of continued drug use as a safer more sustainable practice.

Harm reduction principles are useful in many other arenas too such as weight loss and management, self-injurious behaviors, and for persons engaged in prostitution or other dangerous sexual practices. Examples of harm reduction for eating disorders such as binge eating would include: not keeping unhealthy foods in the house, substituting healthier choices for snacks, preparing your own food instead of eating fast food, and practicing portion control. For example, instead of eating Oreos eat popcorn.