

COMPASSION

AS A GUIDING ACTION



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MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE





Substance use has been a part of society's cultural and social history for centuries; however, the ways in which people have been involved and what substances are most commonly used continue to shift and change.

It is an unprecedented time in terms of substance use.

The introduction of highly potent opiates, such as fentanyl and carfentanil, has caused staggering spikes in accidental overdose deaths. There were 914 deaths across BC in 2016.

The lives lost were sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, friends, colleagues and neighbors. Community members and families are facing crisis and devastating loss.

In the wake of these tragic deaths, and in an effort to prevent further harm, communities are working together to find answers. Questions as to why this crisis is happening and how to prevent further risk weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of many, and despite best efforts, uncertainty and debate continues.

Substance use is a complex issue. While there are many theories, there is no universal agreement or scientific truth to fully answer the questions of why and what to do about substance use.

Key insights are emerging into what can influence the reduction of risk and address substance use. These include compassion along with a commitment to address the harmful consequences of stigma, fear and discrimination, all of which affect the wellbeing of those impacted by substance use.

COMPASSION IN ACTION

Compassion is necessary in addressing the risks associated with substance use. Here are some ideas to foster compassionate responses.

THE PERSON IS NOT THE PROBLEM. THE PROBLEM IS THE PROBLEM.

Contribute to positive self-concept by avoiding labels (e.g. drug addict, criminal), negative criticisms (e.g. weak, liar) and blame. Focus on strengths, ability, esteem and importance.

COMMUNITY INCLUSION INCREASES SAFETY.

Fear and stigma have excluded people involved with substances from participating as valued citizens in community settings, in turn increasing the risk of further isolation and harm. Supporting access to health care, harm reduction resources and community opportunities fosters belonging and demonstrates a person's importance to the community.

WORDS CREATE WORLDS.

Use language that emphasizes perspectives of strength, resilience and capacity as related to a person's identity. People involved with substances are often faced with judgments and attitudes that contribute to the risk of harm and continued substance use.

IN THE FACE OF PAIN (EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL), DISTRESS AND TRAUMA, SUBSTANCE USE MAY BE ONE OF THE WAYS PEOPLE COPE.

Recognize the impact of trauma and its effect on fellow community members.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY.

Relationships with loved ones, communities and resources that honour dignity and respect increase safety, equalize power imbalances and humanize people in distress. Having the opportunity to establish safe connections can be a healing and protective factor in the face of risk.

RESILIENCE IS NOT SOLELY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL.

Resilience is influenced by who and what is around us. Access to housing, public policies addressing poverty and health, availability of treatment resources, and access to culturally relevant support must be considered alongside efforts to reduce harm and substance use risks.

YOU ARE NOT IN THIS ALONE.

Taking care of self and others is key to addressing the on-going impact of accidental overdose. Compassion and kindness echo throughout communities, meeting our most basic needs as human beings to be cared for.



REDUCING STIGMA

While it's never too early or too late to talk about substance use, Stigma refers to a set of negative beliefs most often associated with a particular quality, situation or person.

Shame and stigma contribute to isolation. Isolation increases the risk of death by overdose, particularly when people use substances alone.

Stigma, negative stereotypes and the resulting discrimination can be some of the most problematic aspects of substance use. Stigma contributes to shame, blame, guilt and isolation—all of which build barriers to lifesaving support.

Compassion is powerful. Compassion is the feeling that, when confronted with another's suffering, we are motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion involves putting a face on human suffering and acknowledging the powerful impact of feeling supported during distress.

Compassion breaks down the walls built by stigma by recognizing and accepting the experience of fellow human beings. Compassionate response to substance use opens doors by encouraging acceptance and safety.



OVERDOSE FIRST AID

Concerned citizens and family members find themselves preparing to give lifesaving first aid to prevent death in the event of accidental overdose.

The overdose crisis has prompted shifts in the availability and administration of naloxone. Naloxone is a lifesaving medicine used in the resuscitation of people overdosing from opiates such as heroin, morphine, methadone and fentanyl. Naloxone blocks the effects of opiates and is an invaluable first aid response to people at risk of dying.

Take Home Naloxone (THN) kits are increasingly available to those most likely to witness or respond to an accidental overdose.

For information on how you can become trained to give naloxone and to access a free THN kit, visit: www.towardtheheart.com.

Toward the Heart also has a 12 minute educational video outlining the crisis and steps to take to prevent overdoses, called *Naloxone Saves Lives*.

RESPONSIVE CARE

The decision to seek support is a significant and courageous step in changing one's relationship with substances.

The ability to access available resources is necessary when making such an important change. Opioid substitution therapies (i.e. Suboxone) can be an effective treatment for opioid dependence. A variety of other resources including counselling, withdrawal management, live-in treatment and group support can also contribute to enhanced health and wellbeing. Resources that are strength-based, capacity-focused, inclusive and compassionate increase a person's engagement and support their efforts to change.

RESOURCES

Health resources related to substance use, such as counselling support, information and referrals, are accessible across Vancouver Island.

The following resources can be helpful starting points for people involved with substances, their family members or carers, and concerned community members.

Island Health: Offers local resources and information, at www.viha.ca/mho/overdose and www.viha.ca/mhas

Toward the Heart: Information on naloxone and fentanyl, visit www.towardtheheart.com

Discovery Youth & Family Substance Use Services: www.viha.ca/youth-substance-use/discovery

BC Drug & Poison Information Centre Hotline: call 1-800-567-8911

HealthLink BC: information on overdose, call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca

Kelty Mental Health: download *Recognizing Resilience: A Workbook for Parents and Caregivers of Teens Involved with Substances*, at www.keltymentalhealth.ca

HeretoHelp: Current information, publications and stories about mental health and addiction, at www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Urgent Help: If you need immediate support or believe a loved one is at risk of harm, contact the Vancouver Island Crisis Line at 1-888-494-3888 24 hours a day, or call 911.

MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

Island Health's Mental Health and Substance Use program is committed to providing effective, collaborative and strength-based services throughout a person's life. We strive to be accessible and accountable to people, their families and other supports.

People are offered services that are: welcoming, confidential, non-judgmental, respectful, client-directed, supportive and informative.

Mental Health and Substance Use offers a range of programs that include: individual, family and group counselling, harm reduction, detox, supported residential services and outreach services. For more information, visit: www.viha.ca/mhas.