

Over the Influence: The Harm Reduction Guide for Managing Drugs and Alcohol

Patt Denning, Jeannie Little and Adina Glickman, New York: The Guilford Press
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Since publication of the “Big Book” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939) addictive behavior, especially the addictive use of alcohol has largely been viewed as a progressive and incurable disease characterized by inevitable loss of control stemming from character defects, which is treated by the admission of powerlessness and submission to a higher power for intervention. According to this model, sufferers of the disease must hit bottom and experience devastating consequences in order to break the denial that keeps them from making healthy choices for themselves. Support for those desiring change comes from other disease sufferers who have worked the program of recovery. Complete and lasting abstinence is the measure of success for adherents of this model. Abstinence is defined as the number of days since the last use of alcohol, and is commemorated by the use of anniversary chips. Participants introduce themselves “alcoholics” or “addicts” to remind them of the baffling and relapsing nature of their disease. While this approach has helped millions of people with alcohol and drug use problems over the years, many individuals find it ineffective, counterintuitive, and at times objectionable.

In recent years, alternatives to the Alcoholics Anonymous approach have been developed and refined. Many of these alternative theories were first published in clinical or scholarly journals and are now applied in the self-help milieu: harm reduction is one such idea. *Over the Influence: The Harm Reduction guide for Managing Drugs and Alcohol* by Patt Denning, Jeannie Little, and Adina Glickman is intended to help individuals with drug or alcohol use concerns; either their own chemical use or that of someone they know. Although focusing on personal self-help, *Over the Influence* would be very useful for professionals in the drug and alcohol treatment field who are unfamiliar with the concept of harm reduction.

As opposed to the traditional chemical dependence treatment approach, *Over the Influence: The Harm Reduction Guide for Managing Drugs and Alcohol* presents drug and alcohol use as a continuum ranging from responsible use to chaotic and compulsive use. The authors avoid the terms *substance abuse* and *substance dependence*. Also notably absent from the book are the labels *alcoholic* and *addict*. They do not assume that abstinence will be the goal of their intended readers. Information is presented in a self-help format, but harm reduction does not require group attendance or professional treatment. The authors advocate for any efforts to change drug or alcohol use behavior that causes harm. The book is very consistent with cognitive behavioral therapy principles and draws upon the ideas of many notable clinicians and theorists.

Over the Influence is organized into eleven chapters guiding the reader from an introduction of the theory of harm reduction to practicing substance use management and ultimately to determining the effectiveness of their efforts. Each chapter ends with a very informative listing of Sources and Suggested Readings. Many chapters also include worksheets to reinforce and personalize the information presented. A Resources section following the chapters includes treatment centers employing harm reduction, harm reduction organizations, alternative self-help programs, and online resources. A summary of the sources and suggested readings listing in each chapter is also included. Information is presented in a very clear and positive manner and flows quite easily.

The authors define harm reduction as “any effort to reduce the harm caused by drug or alcohol use.” They offer a brief overview of the disease model of addiction in order to contrast

the principles of harm reduction. The arguments presented against the traditional beliefs of the disease model are quite persuasive and are intended to enhance the reader's motivation to attempt changes in their behavior, rather than forcing change through guilt, coercion, or external demands. As an alternative to the notion of being diseased, *Over the Influence* proposes that individuals have a relationship with the drugs or alcohol that they use. "The relationship is probably complicated. Like all relationships, some are healthy, some unhealthy. Some are both." It is in examining, understanding, and changing this relationship that individuals reduce harm in their lives and gain more control over the consequences of their behavior. Denning, Little, and Glickman assert that the complex relationship between drugs and drug users is an interaction between the effects of the drug, the needs of the drug user, and the environment in which the drug is used. This model is referred to as Drug, Set, Setting.

Understanding the effects that drugs and alcohol produce is important in gaining insight into the reason why they are being used. This is the "Drug" aspect of the harm reduction model. Chapter 4 of the book describes the psychological benefits, medical benefits, and social benefits of numerous classes of drugs. The effect of various drugs at the neuronal level is explained and definitions of the primary neurotransmitters are offered. A 52 page highlighted section of the book explores the concepts of tolerance, withdrawal, abuse, dependence, routes of administration, neurotransmitter action, and metabolism of drugs and alcohol. This section also details the history and uses, efficacy, mechanisms of action, effects, dependence/tolerance/withdrawal, benefits, risks, greatest dangers, drug interactions, and harm reduction suggestions for many classes of drugs. The substances addressed include Alcohol, Sedatives/Hypnotics and Anxiolytics, Opiates and Opioids, Major Stimulants, Nicotine, Caffeine, Marijuana (Cannabinoids), Hallucinogens, Ecstasy, Dissociative Anesthetics, and Inhalants. This information is especially important for the layperson. The authors argue that being educated about the substances we use helps us to "Just Say Know".

The emotions, personality, motivations, and expectations of the drug/alcohol user fall under the "Set" element of the Drug, Set, Setting model. Readers are encouraged to explore their individual "Set" by identifying concerns, both emotional and practical, in their life which may contribute to drug or alcohol use. A Hierarchy of Needs Worksheet is presented to identify and prioritize the reader's various concerns, the substances used (Drug), the individual's emotions and personality (Set), and the environment (Setting). Assigning priority to these issues helps identify starting points for harm reduction attention. The prioritized nature of this worksheet emulates Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1962). This format allows the reader to more fully understand the interaction between Drug, Set, and Setting and thereby gain insight into their relationship with their drug(s) of choice.

The authors describe the dilemmas and difficulty of change. The choices facing the drug or alcohol user include changing everything, eliminating one or more drug and keeping others, switching to a less harmful drug, changing the route of administration, or changing the amount and/or frequency of use. All of these choices are consistent with the harm reduction belief that "any positive change is harm reduction." The use of decisional balance in exploring the costs and benefits of changing is encouraged to help prepare for change. The constructs of resistance and ambivalence are introduced as vital elements to be addressed in the change process. The authors point out that "ambivalence is the single most important feeling to pay attention to in practicing harm reduction." Ambivalence is seen as a direct product of the prospect of changing the individual's relationship with drugs or alcohol. This is much more flexible and forgiving than the traditional concept of denial. The Stages of Change model (Prochaska, Norcross, &

DiClemente, 1994) is presented in a very understandable format. The Stages of Change Worksheets included in Chapter 5 help the reader track the different stages of change and progress for each substance (or other problem) over time.

Substance Use Management (SUM) describes any efforts to control substance use and reduce the harm associated with drug or alcohol use. Specific SUM techniques are detailed in Chapter 7. The specific techniques identified are; changing the amount used, changing the number/types of substances used, changing the frequency of use, changing the route of administration, changing the situation, planning drug/alcohol use, overdose prevention, and abstinence. The authors present each of these techniques in the Drug, Set, Setting format. Chapter 8, "How to Take Care of Yourself While Still Using" follows.

Chapter 9 addresses treatment options. Suggestions are offered in choosing an appropriate therapist to aid in harm reduction efforts. Various drug treatment options are described. The authors provide very practical and useful questions that may be asked of the potential therapist and/or treatment center. Chapter 10 asks "Is Harm Reduction Working?" Ways to assess progress are provided while the reader is once again reminded that any positive change is progress. Chapter 11 addresses how to talk to others about harm reduction. Various myths of the traditional recovery model are disputed in a point-counterpoint manner. Other questions and issues are presented in a role-playing format. Chapter 12 is a letter to the family and friends of the drug or alcohol user. Issues related to change, denial and tough love are addressed. The authors suggest that friends and family members use harm reduction themselves to help cope with the effects of other's drug or alcohol use on their lives.

Over the Influence: The Harm Reduction Guide for Managing Drugs and Alcohol presents the Harm Reduction model in a very informative and easy to read format. Patt Denning, Jeannie Little, and Adina Glickman encourage the reader to make healthy changes for themselves in a positive, compassionate, and nonjudgmental manner. They allow room for skepticism and ambivalence in the individual contemplating changing his or her relationship with drugs or alcohol. Positive reinforcement is provided throughout the book enhancing the reader's subjective experience of success as opposed to the frustration frequently encountered in many self-help books related to substance use. The authors demonstrate many of the core principles of cognitive therapy in their manner of relating to the reader. This book is an excellent resource for mental health professionals and the clients they treat.

References

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