

Let's Talk about Drugs

A Guide to Community Dialogue

Coming together as a community to address complex issues like drug policy, drug use or overdose requires that we build understanding between all members of the community. Understanding each other starts with honesty.

Honesty about the facts ...

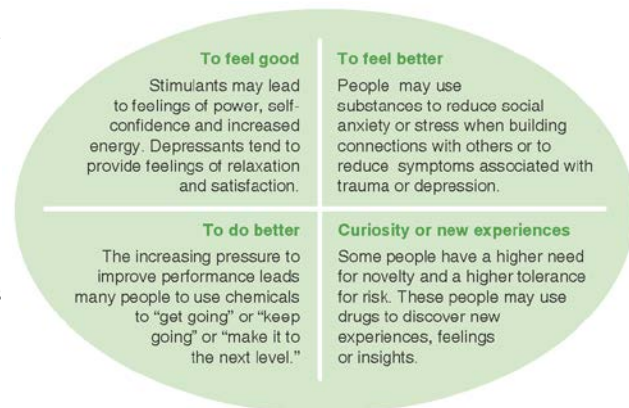
- that human beings have been using psychoactive substances for thousands of years (long before the beginning of recorded history)
- that virtually all of us use psychoactive substances (be it caffeine, alcohol, chocolate, cannabis, prescription opioids or street drugs like heroin or fentanyl) to celebrate success, to deal with grief or sadness, to mark rites of passage or to pursue new experiences or insights
- that we choose to use these substances because they provide us with some perceived benefit even though we are often aware that using them also involves some risk

This honesty encourages us to see ourselves and all others as citizens of the human community and to acknowledge that drug use is deeply embedded in our cultural fabric. The challenge then is to discover how to manage that use, as individuals and communities, in ways that maximize benefit and minimize harm. In order to do that we need to learn to understand each other enough to function together in the pursuit of our common goal.

We must do it together

Unfortunately there is a trend within our democratic institutions toward a winner-takes-all orientation. We have become accustomed to debates that pit one against another: idea against idea, issue against issue, person against person. But this doesn't work. Those who lose do not go away, they simply disengage. This disengagement actually contributes to the situation we face today with rising overdose rates, various drug cultures and other problems related to drug use.

We all use drugs for a variety of reasons, and those reasons influence the patterns of use and the risk of harmful consequences. Those who become disengaged from community (school, work, and social institutions) are more likely to have experienced trauma or to be coping with higher levels of grief or pain (physical, emotional or spiritual). Many turn to drugs to provide ongoing relief. As communities and societies we help shape the level of risk involved. Attitudes and actions that stigmatize people or exclude them from full participation in the community make the situation worse. Well-meaning services designed and delivered by others and that do not include the service recipients as full partners are Band-Aids at best. People who are currently disconnected in our communities, nonetheless, have valuable experiential knowledge that can help us craft safer, healthier communities.



This means we need to ...

- **Find ways to bring everyone to the table.** We have to move toward a spirit of celebrating diversity and away from an us-and-them orientation. It is not good enough for a group of concerned citizens to gather and discuss solutions that largely relate to others not present. This would involve a commitment to the concept of "nothing about us without us."

- **Train ourselves to listen to each other.** Our focus should be on reaching understanding about the diversity of views and insights in the community. This opens up the opportunity to discover new possibilities, new ways of solving problems. A focus on winning the argument limits us to choosing between currently articulated options.
- **Focus on relationships not “facts.”** The need to build trust between people is fundamental. This is the building block for collective action. Bringing in a group of experts to present the evidence has not proven particularly effective in addressing complex social problems like drug policy or problematic patterns of drug use.

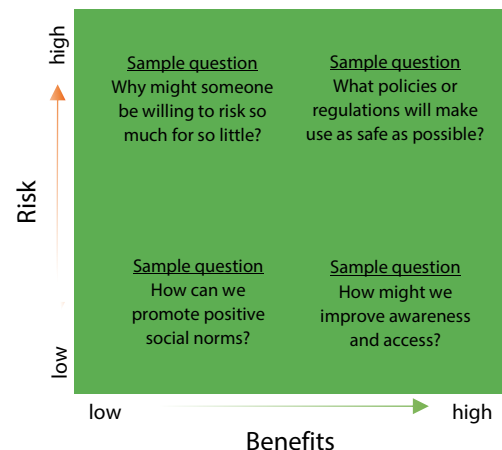
Questions are more important than answers

When we are confronted with a new situation, it is common to want to know all the facts. This seems completely sensible. But there is a problem. When dealing with complex issues, like substance use, cannabis policy and rising rates of overdose, no one has all the answers. When we don't know all the facts, we sometimes conclude that we can't do anything. We have to wait for the experts to figure out the answers for us.

As parents, teachers and other community members, however, we have many opportunities to educate ourselves and our children about drug-related issues. This involves honestly sharing our thoughts, feelings and experiences related to drugs and drug use with each other. We all have things to learn. We all have knowledge to share. Our knowledge, however, is not absolute. My knowledge relates to the experiential context in which I gained that knowledge. Having honest, open conversations is therefore more useful than telling others what to do or what to think. Other people are more likely to explore, develop and share their ideas if we demonstrate our vulnerability by being open to critically examining our own views. Real discussion involves a curiosity about what the other thinks and feels and an openness to consider how those thoughts and feelings might enhance our own understanding.

To be educated is not to know all the answers. It means having the competencies and confidence to engage with others on questions so as to gain understanding that helps us make good decisions. Indeed, education is more about questions than answers.

The skill we need to develop, both as individuals and as communities, is managing our patterns of substance use in ways that take allow us to experience the benefits while minimizing the risks of harm. We can do this through individual choices, through social norms and public discourse as well as through policies and regulations. It may be helpful to use a dual continua model to help generate questions and understand the issues. Both benefits and risks range from very low to very high but on intersecting axes. Each quadrant in the model suggests a different set of questions. Engaging together to formulate and explore the emerging questions will help us become competent in helping each other deal with drugs.



This means we need to ...

- **Bring people together.** People need multiple opportunities to talk to each other in safe environments conducive to listening in order to reach understanding. Reading clubs, philosophers' cafes and other venues that do not have decision-making agendas are useful for this purpose. They can provide an opportunity to explore questions and nurture conversation rather than encourage relentless and heated debate about drug-related issues.
- **Avoid promoting simple answers.** While simple answers may be appealing, they are rarely useful. They do little to bring people together to address complex issues like those related to drug policy and drug use. Instead they provide position statements around which competing factions can coalesce and continue arguing. We need to find ways to bring the community together, pool the various insights of the members and reach a degree of understanding that allows us to function together as a community.

- **Find ways to nurture inquiry.** Despite the old adage, curiosity did not kill the cat. The openness to explore, to ask, to question is essential to gaining understanding and to moving forward as a community. Putting the focus on posing the right questions – questions around which community members can meaningfully engage – and nurturing an environment of respectful curiosity will help harness the wisdom of the community and provide needed resources for addressing community needs.

Now is the time

Too often we only address issues in community when there is a perceived crisis. This is unfortunate because in a crisis we often feel we need to find immediate solutions, and sometimes we do. But we often lose sight of the fact that what we need to do in response to the crisis is usually not what we need to do to avoid the crisis.

Let's be clear

Community dialogue is great for building the connections that nurture resilient communities. Resilient communities are more resistant to crises. But community dialogue may be less effective in crafting quick responses to a crisis. Once the community is in crisis, often leadership that can mobilize the community quickly around a harm reducing strategy is critical.

Of course, a history of community dialogue creates greater trust and will make mobilizing the community much easier even in a crisis.

Nonetheless, perceived crisis gives us added opportunities to educate by engaging people in honest open conversations. What do they think of the current crisis? Why do they think people are overdosing more often? How do they think they can address their own wellness and safety in the current context? What changes would they like to see? In asking these questions with real curiosity about what others think and feel, we have opportunity to also express what we think and feel. (And we don't even have to be the authority who knows all the answers – we just need to have honest conversations.) A commitment to engaging the community in conversations that encourage critical thinking and the consideration of different ideas will increase intentionality.

This notion of intentionality is important! When we are asked to consciously think about our own views and behaviour in a non-threatening environment, we are more likely to reflect and maybe make adjustments. This exchange of ideas in conversation is likely to be far more effective than any campaign to spread a particular message or encourage behaviour change in others.

So, no matter whether our community is in crisis or not, it is never too early, or too late, to begin honest and open community dialogues about drugs and drug policy. But we do need to be clear that dialogue is not about debating facts or winning arguments. Dialogue is about listening to each other with an openness to learn from each other. Engaging in dialogue increases our awareness of our own attitudes, ideas and behaviour even as we come to understand others. Investing in dialogue means trusting that this greater understanding will provide the foundation for stronger community as we find ways to work together.

This means we need to ...

- **Be pragmatic about immediate responses.** A good response to a current crisis will not solve the problems related to drug use any more than good paramedic services are an adequate response to heart disease. They are essential in the short term, but much more is needed.
- **Recognize that community dialogue takes time to be effective.** The real strength of community dialogue is not in bringing people together in a crisis but in building trust and understanding over time that provides a foundation for effective collective action.
- **Find multiple ways to engage diverse community members in dialogue.** These dialogues need to help community members understand the wisdom of the Indigenous story of the six-sided box. From whatever perspective we look at the box, we never see more than three sides. In dialogue with others, we can begin to gain broader perspective, understand other ways of seeing the situation and other ways of addressing the challenge. Dialogue opens up possibility.

- **Begin now to create more cohesive, resilient communities.** Dialogue is not a magic solution to all social ills. Nonetheless, it opens the door to an alternative reality in which the other need not be the enemy to be feared and defeated or the leper to be excluded. We may all discover, through meaningful engagement, ways to move beyond the past trauma and hurt to a more creative and resilient community.

More Tips and Helpful Resources

- **It is not all about drugs.** Bruce Alexander's "rat park" experiments and his analysis of social disintegration in Indigenous communities – some in which alcohol was present and some where it was not – invite us to look beyond the drugs and the individuals taking them to consider the impact of the physical and social environment. See:
www.stuartmcmillen.com/comics_en/rat-park/
www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/assets/docs/iminds/drug-alcohol-tsesahat.pdf
www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/understanding-substance-use-a-health-promotion-perspective.pdf
- **One size does not fit all.** A young woman who has never used illegal drugs and chooses to do so for the first time on her 16th birthday might overdose, as might a young man who has been, since age 12, using every drug he can find to try to keep at bay the demons who disrupt his mental stability. Both individuals overdose, but the context and issues are not the same. Neither are the strategies we need to use in trying to prevent the tragedies. See:
www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/understanding-substance-use-a-health-promotion-perspective.pdf
www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/helping-people-who-use-substances-a-health-promotion-perspective.pdf
- **Beware of high moral claims.** As Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, reminds us, "The higher the morality, the more vicious the hatred and hence destruction we can, indeed, must, wreak." Unfortunately, this has often been the case in past discussions of drugs and drug policy. The alternative is to recognize that we all struggle to manage powerful forces (e.g., sex, drugs, violence) in our lives. While the struggle of the other may be different than our own, an orientation to empathy will help us find ways to support each other. See:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewgu369Jw
- **Support parents and families.** Parenting and supporting children as they grow and mature into adults is a demanding calling. Like kids, parents do not need to be told what to do – "the five keys to good parenting" – but they do need support, to know they are not alone. Creating opportunities for parents to share ideas, explore issues and find emotional support in the community can be very important. See:
www.healthlinkbc.ca/substance-use/parenting-articles
www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/cannabis-use-and-youth-a-parents-guide.pdf
- **Support effective drug education.** Drug education is not social marketing. Social marketing is about telling people what to do. Drug education helps people develop the knowledge and skills they need in order to increase control over their own well-being in a world in which psychoactive drugs are available and widely used. See:
www.iminds.ca

Further Reading:

Alexander, B. (2008). *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sennett, R. (2012). *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Taylor, C. (2011a). Notes on the Sources of Violence: Perennial and Modern. In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (pp. 188–213). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Taylor, C. (2011b). Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes. In *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (pp. 24–38). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

This resource has been developed in the context of crisis and controversy. Controversy seems the perennial condition with respect to drug use and drug policy. Current plans to revise Canadian policy with respect to cannabis, however, make it contemporary. The rising drug overdose rates and the declaration of a public health emergency in British Columbia provide the crisis. We hope this resource will help communities as they seek to address these and other realities.